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“Leaning In” as Imperfect Allies in Community Work

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Abstract

The work of allies in community work is informed by justice-doing and decolonizing practice. A brief description of being an ally is outlined here, as well as understandings of the importance of the concepts of fluidity and groundless solidarity in ally work. “Leaning in” is described and offered as a way to invite accountability while resisting righteousness. “Leaning in” invites collective accountability, which is a more useful concept than personal responsibility, which sides with individualism and the idea we are only held accountable for our personal actions. Strategies for being an ally are considered, including engaging with a hopeful skepticism while reflexively questioning whether we are “walking the talk.” The limitations of allies are discussed, as well as the need to make repair for our failures as allies. Strategies for resisting both unity and division are addressed, as is the possibility of creating cultures of critique that allow for something other than attack and division. Imperfect solidarity based on points of connection is offered as a useful strategy for maintaining good-enough and required alliances across time. Finally, some exercises are offered for readers to engage with: an inquiry into their histories and imperfect practices of being and needing allies, and some invitations to step into domains where they have previously not served as allies.

Keywords

ally, community work, leaning in, power, privilege, fluidity, imperfect solidarity

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“Leaning In” as Imperfect Allies in Community Work

The story that follows illuminates an experience of messy and imperfect ally work on the number 20 bus that goes through the Downtown East Side, the poorest part of Vancouver, and the poorest off-reserve part of Canada.

I get on the 20 bus late at night, and like most women, I can tell you exactly how many drunk men are on the bus. But there is one guy that requires all of my attention because he's loud, he's standing up and he's shouting racist things at an elder Chinese woman. I stand still, not moving, looking and listening. I think what am I going to do? The first thing I think about is, I can't take on a great big, drunk man. I've tried this in my life, it hasn't worked for me and I'm scared of great big drunk men. I'm not required as an ally to take on that guy, unless I have the power to do it. I am required to be an ally to this woman.

I look at the Chinese elder woman and I kind of throw my love at her. I want her to know I'm here, I'm with her. I'm going to try to figure out what I'm going to do. She's got her head down, she's got her groceries on her seat next to her and she's tucked in tight. She's not looking at my love that I'm throwing at her. This is a good tactic, but it's not working.

While I'm trying to figure out how the heck I'm going to respond, a young, sweet, lovely person who I could not tell the gender of slips by me, Aikido style, and picks up the groceries, puts them on their lap and sits next to her. What I saw as a full seat, this person saw as a seat without a person in it.

Beautiful! What a beautiful thing! So now, there is a body between this elder Chinese woman and this man who is attacking her with racism. The Chinese woman doesn't thank this person. I can tell this person is looking to say, “Should I put my arm around you? Should I talk to you?”

And the Chinese woman is letting them know she's not engaging with them either.

There's a whole bunch of us on the bus that are thinking, “OK. What's the next thing we should do?”

This guy is still going. Now I'm rooting for this young person, and I'm worried for them. My read is that they are possibly trans, or gender-variant and maybe they are queer¹, so they could be next to be attacked. Why should they be in front of this big angry guy? This is not good.

There's a really large First Nations guy on the bus. I can't tell whether or not he's had a few beers or he's doing performance art because he's by the window, and he slips by the person on the aisle seat, puts his hand on the bar and swings around, you know, takes all the room on the bus.

In my head I'm thinking, “Oh man! Big guy stuff, there's big guy and big guy; this is going to be bad.”

But no, I totally misjudged this guy. He's being an accountable man, what he's saying is bring it on, bring it over here.

One of the nasty things the white guy had said to the Chinese woman was, “Get back on the boat. Go back to China.”

And the big First Nations guy says to the white guy, with humor, “Hey man, you are the original boat person. Christopher Columbus was your captain. Get back on your own damn boat,” and he's laughing as he says this.

Everyone on the bus exhales, because we know we are going to be OK-enough, and then everybody leans in, and the guy looks at me, and though I do seem inept, I am available to be an ally. He looks at me and, with a smile, he asks, “What the hell boat did you come from?”

I timidly say, “Ireland, Newfoundland, a little bit of England.”

He says, “You can stay, you know your boats.”

He starts holding court, inviting other folks into the fray.

As all this is going down, I notice the elder Chinese woman picks up her groceries and slips out the door at the next stop. I go out with her. The bus goes on. I don't get to see the rest of this lesson in 500 years of resistance to colonization, but I envision it: it makes me happy.

But I'm left on the sidewalk with the Chinese woman, and I'm wondering if she wanted me to accompany her, does she feel safe-enough to go to her home. She puts her head down and she kind of runs, dragging her groceries behind her. She's probably not new to this. She probably has really good reasons to not trust me either. I'm not a perfect ally to her, she doesn't love me, she doesn't thank me: she takes off.

I realize I cannot follow her. A big white person following her would be scary, so I try to let go of what I want to do. I want to be the perfect ally, but she's saying, “No.”

This is what no looks like. I work at WAVAW (Women Against Violence Against Women) a rape crisis centre. We work really hard to hear no and listen to no. So I'm thinking, “Vikki, you've got to hear no too.”

So I know this is going to be imperfect, she's probably OK-enough, and she's probably lived with this her whole life.

I turn around. There are three other women at the bus stop and we are a real multiplicity of women. And one of them looks at me, looks at everyone else, and says, “This is nobody's stop, is it?”

And we say, “No.”

“We're all going to wait for the next bus?”

We all chuckle and respond, “Yeah.”

And that was my moment of the social divine (Lacey, 2005), that four different women would get off at the wrong stop to accompany this woman who didn't need us to walk her home, and didn't thank us. And the big First Nations guy and the young, possibly gender-variant person, and all the folks who “leaned in” on the bus are a part of the fabric of the social divine.

These are beautiful moments. When people do the right thing.

And there I was saying, “Oh man. What am I doing alone at night at an unfamiliar bus stop? This isn't the best scene for you, Vik.”

But I have these other women in solidarity on this street, and I know there are accountable men and gender-variant folks on that bus. This changes things for me, it matters for me. I hold these moments of

the social divine alongside the terror of the racism this Chinese woman experienced. That's the real story, and that's a heart-breaking story (Reynolds, 2012,).

Introduction

In community work informed by justice-doing, we act in solidarity with shared purposes and shoulder each other up to resist structural violence and abuses of power and work to create a more just society (Reynolds, 2010a). This requires us to act as allies to each other across the differences of privilege and access to power that we hold. Allies belong to groups that have particular privileges, and work alongside people from groups that are subjected to power in relation to that privilege. The role of the ally is to respond to the abuses of power in the immediate situation, and to work for systemic social change (Bishop, 2002). Allies work collectively to contribute to the making of a space in which the person who is subjected to power gets to have their voice heard and listened to. Being heard is not enough — a person's words must matter and not be dismissed. This contributes to the creation of “Spaces of Justice” (Lacey, 2005).

Being an ally is not a badge of honor but a sign of privilege and it is risky to be romantic or sentimental about this. When we experience being the subject of power, abuses of power, oppression, or attacks on our dignity we accept allies because we need them, not because it is safe or because we have reasons for perfect trust. We invite good-enough allies, despite past acts that are not trustworthy as imperfect allies are required when the stakes are high and risk is near. The need for allies speaks to structures of social injustice. Our greater purpose is to deliver a just society, not to show up as allies, because our access to power makes that possible. Ally work requires humility and a resistance to righteousness, alongside the skill and moral courage required to name abuses of power from people within the same groups allies belong to.

Power relations are complex and, in order to resist simplification, I will speak of subjection as well as oppression. Oppression does exist, but it is not the only way in which power is used to subject people. All abuses of power are not oppression. As well, power is not always oppressive, and can be generative. I borrow this teaching from critical Trans theorist/activist Dean Spade (2011):

I use the term “subjection” to talk about the workings of systems of meaning and control such as racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia. I use “subjection” because it indicates that power relations impact how we know ourselves as subjects through these systems of meaning and control... “oppression” brings to mind the notion that one set of people are dominating another set of people, that one set of people “have power” and another set are denied it...The operations of power are more complicated than that...our strategies need to be careful not to oversimplify how power operates. Thinking about power as top/down, oppressed/oppressor, dominator/dominated can cause us to miss opportunities for intervention and to pick targets for change that are not the most strategic. The term “subjection” captures how systems of meaning and control that concern us permeate our lives, our ways of knowing about the world, and our ways of imagining transformation.

For example, this racist attack on the Chinese elder on the bus is not the only way all of the folks on the bus are subjected to power. It is not only a case of one individual white man attacking an individual woman with verbal racism. What happens is made possible by the existence of a background discourse that structures what happens on the bus. Racist immigration laws in Canada, which prohibited Chinese immigration, disrupted family unification and refused citizenship, and the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion legislation, which impoverished Chinese families, are particular policies that have fostered this racist attackⁱⁱ. Corporate media coverage of “boat people” as threatening and not worthy of refuge is another part of the operating context.

On the other hand, the elder Chinese woman's multiple acts of resistance are responses to her subjection to power. Looking down, being hunched over, and not engaging anyone, are acts of resistance that make up an intelligent and prudent resistance strategy. She has probably had success staying safe-enough by taking less space. Her acts of resistance are responses to her subjection to power, as there is always resistance to oppression and attacks on people's dignity (Scott, 1985, 1990; Wade, 1996, 1997; Reynolds, 2010b).

Simultaneously, the cultural stories the white guy is immersed in are also part of the context. They continually promote a notion of white men as a vulnerable population at the hands of

multiculturalism and feminism. He is on a bus, and guys should drive cars. He is by no means the perfect oppressor, and is subjected by the lies of the particular culture of masculinity held up by capitalism and patriarchy which demand that men should be in charge (drive) and be rich (own a car). Perhaps he is responding to the ways in which the dominant discourse positions him as a failure. This event is thus more than a singular act of oppression of a Chinese person by a white person. It happens at the point of intersection of “lines of force” (Deleuze, 1995, p. 85) about gender, immigration status, age, class and race, which are all part of the particular context. It is not accidental, for example, that this racist attack is not targeted at a Chinese young man who is in the company of six large friends.

While I find Spade's analysis of power useful, it is problematic that the above passage appears agentless: there are no offenders or agents that write, print, circulate, gossip, lie, belittle, and invent the “systems of meaning and control.” But these meaning systems that appear disembodied are linked to systems of oppression, violence, relations of physical and material and social power, and arguably inseparable from them. Agentless constructions, such as “systems of meaning” cannot by themselves do injustice: they must be produced, warranted, justified, replicated, used, sanctioned and so on — by social agents (A. Wade, personal communication, 2012). But neither can individual agents act oppressively without the background systems of meaning (J. Winslade, personal communication, 2012). The main problem with Spade's view of subjection is that it does not begin to explain the actions of the people on the bus, not even the drunk white guy shouting racism.

Fluidity and Groundless Solidarity

Like the folks on the 20 bus, we are never perfect allies, but may become imperfect allies, momentary allies, creating moment-to-moment alliances which are flawed, not necessarily safe, but required and of use. Being an ally is not a static identity that requires perfection and always getting it right. It is a tactic informed by strategies, a performance (Butler, 1990). Ally work is comprised of actions potential allies take together across the differences of privilege that divide them to address abuses of power. Queer theory has brought exciting ideas to ally work (Jagose, 1996; Butler, 1997) inviting fluidity, which is movement from the fixed and certain to the confused and unstable (Queen & Schimel, 1997).

Embracing fluidity in ally work means that being an ally is not a fixed position. Fluidity is useful for ally work because it acknowledges that in particular situations we all need allies, and in different contexts we can all serve as allies (Reynolds, 2010c). For example, the First Nations guy on the bus is called on to act as an ally to the Chinese elder, and to all of the women and gender-variant people on the bus, because of his access to gender privilege. Simultaneously, all of the settler people are required to have his back, as the police might attend and he could easily become the victim of police officers enacting colonization and racism by reading him as the perpetrator of violence and dragging him off of the bus. Fluid ally positioning is responsive to the multiple different domains that construct our identities and the access to power we hold in relation to these domains.

Categories, like domains of identity, are useful at times, but also problematic. American critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw writes about how her identity as a Black woman is constantly subject to erasure (Namaste, 2000) and disappearance by categories (Namaste, 1995). When the category being attended to is race, she is left behind as a Black woman. When the category is gender she is seen as a woman, but being Black is invisibilized. Her work illuminating the intersections of domains of identity has been useful in contributing to a more complex understanding of the intersectionality that comprises identity (Robinson, 2005). Ally positioning must always attend to this fluid intersectionality of sites of access to power, and being the subject of others' power, within the same moments and within the same conversations.

Canadian anarchist/academic Richard Day writes about “groundless solidarity” (2005, p.18), meaning that our activism need not always be tied to one location of power. No location is seen as the organizing principle in all situations; rather, the intersections and the gaps between our multiple locations in relation to privilege and oppression are tended to in a complex analysis. Sometimes we need to address sexism, sometimes it is more important to attend to racism, and, in another interaction, class privilege requires our attention. Of course, we can and must often attend to more than one domain of power at a time. We do not need to move our attention from one mutually exclusive category to another, but can engage in a dance that simultaneously addresses the complexities that comprise power relations.

In Canada, where I live and work, this intersectional approach always exists on colonized territories. In order to resist replicating colonization, we enact a decolonizing practice, which means acting in ways that simultaneously attend to the abuse of power that is happening, and holding ourselves to account in resisting ongoing colonization (Walia, 2012; Richardson & Reynolds, 2012; Lawrence & Dua, 2005). This might sound like inconsistency, but as anarchists say, “We can walk and chew gum.”

In the situation on the 20 bus, we could address men’s violence and attend to colonization at the same time. To do so requires that we always situate ourselves on the land in an accountable way and from that stance we respond to abuses of power. For example, the network of activists resisting the poverty, gentrification and homelessness that resulted from the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver began all organizing from the decolonizing position, ‘No Olympics on stolen Native land’. From that place, we then addressed the devastating social impact of the Olympics facing most folks, not just Indigenous people. We structure decolonizing practice and accountability into all of our organizing, whatever the specific context of power abuses.

“Leaning in” and Collective Accountability

Individual accountability is a limiting idea that does not require us to be responsible for more than our own actions, but social injustice requires enormous, collaborative, and resourced social responses from all members of society, reflecting our “relational responsibilities” (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). Whether we intend to or not, many of us benefit from the oppression of others. We need not feel guilty about this, but we are required to respond to the unearned privileges we hold with accountability. I did not personally take anyone's land as a settler person in Canada, but I certainly benefit from citizenship in the nation state of Canada, which exists on these Indigenous territories. Activism teaches us to analyze structures of power, not just attend to our individual acts. Collective accountability (Reynolds, 2009) requires that we take actions together to change these underlying structures that create the conditions for abuses of power.

For example, as a heterosexual person, I hope to respond to another heterosexual person who is performing homophobia by embracing collective accountability, and acknowledging the relationship that connects them to me through our shared site of privilege. I want to locate myself as collectively responsible for the performance of homophobia, and for the fact that it advantages me. I do not have to perform homophobia or racism or transphobia in order for my status to be elevated on the backs of others. I have to be accountable for more than just my personal actions. The seduction of identifying individually and separating myself off from any participation in collective responsibility at these times can be intense — I want to identify myself as, “not that kind of straight person.” As an ally, I identify collectively as a heterosexual person in the presence of homophobia, and act to help my fellow straight person move towards accountability as well. I want to “lean in” with humility and resist being righteous and attacking the dignity of this heterosexual person. I do not think of people as homophobic, but I know we swim in a culture that hates homosexuals and that, if we do not resist homophobia, we will replicate it. I remind myself in “leaning in” that this person did not invent homophobia and it is now my job to help them understand this and resist this, as others taught me. “Leaning in” towards the other allows us to move toward solidarity, and act in ways that make space for that person and for us to be walking alongside each other.

Collective responsibility also contests the limits of human rights talk and legislation as the only measure of justice-doing. Legal protections would probably not allow for the prosecution of the white guy on the bus who was attacking the elder Chinese woman with racism. As one direct action activist told a white supremacist who asserted he was not acting illegally by trying to disrupt an anti-racism march, “There are a lot of things that are not illegal that you ought not to be doing.”

Some laws are inherently racist, and the law is part of the mechanism that subjects people, so it is more than the application of law that is the issue (Spade, 2011). Collective accountability speaks to a social justice perspective, which may include legal rights, but is much more expansive. It requires us to show up and take imperfect actions immediately in the face of the white guy's attack, and to try to hold what the Chinese woman needs at the centre. Collective accountability invited all of the actions allies

took on the bus, and more. It suggests that we all work to address racism and men's abuses of power, and to transform contexts that make such attacks possible.

Walking the Talk: Engaging a Hopeful Skepticism

Kvale's hermeneutics of suspicion (Kvale, 1996; White, 1991), invites a healthy and hopeful skepticism toward our own practice as to whether we are enacting our ethics and acting as allies in any moment-to-moment interaction. Holding an anti-oppression decolonizing framework is fabulous, but theorizing is of limited value in itself (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Despite the promises of critical theory we have not delivered a just society. Allies engage with the reflexive question activists ask, “Am I walking the talk?” They also embrace “infinite responsibility” or to always attempt to be “open to another other” (Day, 2005, p. 18.) and to the multiplicity of ways we are not acting as allies, despite our intentions.

Would-be allies can inadvertently replicate power-over, lecture righteously, take center-stage, and make situations worse and possibly violent. Any information a person from an oppressed position gives potential allies in any interaction about our abuses of power or less egregious ally-fails are gifts to us. These teachings benefit allies at the cost of the person needing an ally (Tamasese, 2001). Allies work to accept critique with open hearts, and collectively withstand the spiritual pain we experience when we transgress (Reynolds, 2011). The following example speaks to the generous “leaning in” that I experienced in response to my ally-fail with a dear fellow activist.

As part of a Free Tibet rally I gave a speech critiquing the human rights record of the People's Republic of China. After the rally, my longtime activist ally, Sid Chow Tan, approached me, thanked me for my work and my speech, and then let me know that when I was speaking of the human rights violations of the People's Republic of China I only used the words 'China' and 'Chinese'. For Sid that meant that he was implicated in these human rights violations because of his ethnicity. I had denigrated every Chinese person, including the Chinese allies who had been present to protest actions of the Chinese government. I felt a wave of shame, as, of course, this had not been my intention. I thanked Sid for this, and let him know that I would be accountable and attend to differentiating the Chinese government from Chinese people in my future activist work. I apologized for the pain I had caused him, and named what I

had enacted as racism. (Racism against Chinese people is something I get caught up in, living where I do in Vancouver, where it passes easily in polite white Canadian society). Sid immediately put aside our conversation, as it was time to go back to work.

He said, not unkindly, but pragmatically, “We just need to be able to work together; we need you in this movement. I just wanted you to know.”

This event was over a decade ago, and Sid and I continue to work in a less-than-perfect and mutually respectful spirited solidarity. I hold onto this learning as a gift from my fellow activist who has been racialized and minoritizedⁱⁱⁱ. I welcome this enabling shame (Jenkins, 2005; 2006) as it reminds me of my failure as an ally, and my need to stay critical and to make repair when I transgress. The relationship of solidarity Sid and I have in social justice work across decades allowed my transgression to be seen in context, not as the only story of me as an ally. Sid's willingness to “lean in” towards me, to teach me and not to sever relations with me allowed me to exhale, embrace being imperfect, and invited me to responsibility to act more accountably.

Trusting allies is risky, because, as allies, we can always choose to be accountable for our access to power, or not. As allies we can decide to back down, not notice, be silent, minimize, accommodate, or smooth things over. As allies, we need to hold our actions and words accountable to the person who is the subject of another person's power. The ally works to make space and then gets out of the way. For example, a feminist with white skin privilege talking on behalf of women who are racialized risks further marginalizing the women she seeks to be an ally to. The ally may need to make space and not speak, because allies are not qualified to speak. I do not know colonization outside of an academic understanding and teachings from witnessing people's suffering. For example, I did not suffer colonization and have not paid the price of this knowledge and so I am unqualified to speak about it.

An anti-oppression stance requires awareness of our locations in relation to power, and that we act with accountability for that access to power (Razack, 2002). As allies we make our privilege public as an accountability practice. For example, when I work in the impoverished community of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, I find ways to be public^{iv} about the fact that I have never lived on the street or

struggled with substance abuse. I do this, because I am sometimes read as someone who has had these experiences, and these misunderstandings invite a trust and sister-feeling from workers and clients that is neither earned nor real. People may feel more affinity and safety with me than my privileges warrant. Later, they may feel that they have been lied to or that some truth has been withheld from them. When we act as allies and make our privilege public, it can serve as a beginning place for trust to grow.

Limitations of Allies: Embracing Imperfection

Ally work is complicated and messy. As allies we can engage in tactics that are direct actions to resist and respond to abuses of power in the moment. We do not often have the luxury of time to step out, call a meeting and discuss strategies and develop perfect responses, as we need to respond in the moment. That is why it is useful not to hold ourselves to a perfect standard of ally acts, but to reflect after such events to critique our actions, strategize how to take on the broader social issues, and make repair, if that is required. For these reasons it is useful to engage with ally work as an imperfection project.

For example, the gender-variant and possibly queer young person on the bus acted immediately to put their body between the Chinese elder woman and the angry white guy. The First Nations guy invited everyone who was willing to participate to converse with him about their “boats” in an effort to complicate the situation, move attention off of the elder Chinese woman, and create some safety for her, while simultaneously responding to the white guy in a collective way that required that he address another man. The collection of folks on the bus did not need instruction on the purposefulness of the First Nation guy's actions, and possibly some folks did not read the invitation, or chose for their own reasons to pretend nothing was going on, but the folks who “leaned in” responded spontaneously and collectively to structure some safety and invite some accountability.

At times it is more useful to survive events, and help people who are experiencing abuses of power get through them than to publicly challenge hate. Would-be allies often share their shaming silences with me; times they did not step up or speak out. Other times potential allies fail because of ignorance, not reading the situation, fear of being wrong, political correctness, the “politics of politeness”,

past harms, self-interest, indifference, being tired, or being busy. While I invite accountability for times we side with neutrality or fear, I distinguish these times from events in which it is not safe-enough to speak out. In risky situations, allies are often compelled to attend to the person who is abusing power, and this centers the perpetrator, as well as further isolating the victim^v. I invite allies to centre their responses in relation to the victim. What do they need? How will my actions serve the victim? This may require being silent, not making a scene, and accompanying the victim to safer ground. In the absence of the First Nations guy on the bus, I would not have confronted the angry white guy, but would have stuck close to the Chinese elder women and prioritized her safety. In situations where there is the potential for physical violence, allies need to be aware they could easily make situations worse.

Imperfect Solidarity: Resisting Unity and Division

Solidarity is not synonymous with unity. As community workers, we look for common ground on particular issues, rather than a unified position. While holding a common ground on particular issues and declining unity, workers simultaneously decline invitations for division (Bracho, 2000). Such imperfect solidarity requires discernment between division and difference. The point is not to achieve unity by smoothing the edges of all differences, but to find points of connection in relationships that bring forward an “intimacy that does not annihilate difference” (Scapp, R. as cited by hooks, 2003, p. 106).

As community workers, we often experience our work as very individual, which brings with it continual invitations to division. We are separated from each other as workers and organizations competing for scarce resources in the midst of overwhelming need in a political climate of greed and privileged individualism. Invitations to division abound in community work, and we can be seduced into judging other workers, their positions, and their professions. In contexts of adversity, the point is not to figure out which workers and organizations to blame, but to think of ways to change social contexts. Our greatest resources for doing that are each other. The First Nations guy invited me in as an ally without invisibilizing our important differences; in fact, he used our different locations in relation to colonization

to invite me to perform some accountability to both him and to the elder Chinese woman by acknowledging that my people also came to Canada on boats, that I am a settler. This created a point of connection, but did not require us to be in unity. Imperfect solidarity invites workers to be alongside each other, because we need each other, and because it doesn't serve our communities for us to be divided off (Reynolds, 2010c; 2011).

Creating a Culture of Critique

Being allies and working in solidarity does not mean that we are ever hoping to achieve total agreement in collective community work. Creating a culture of critique in which we can challenge each other and hold our practices and theories up to generative and creative scrutiny in order to serve our families and communities better is a useful practice. Being allies to each other in community work invites us to hold each other to account, but we are not acting as allies when judgment and attack are used to silence other workers and discredit them. Discerning critique from attack is part of our work as allies.

Creating a culture of critique begins with "leaning in" and seeing the collective ethics (Reynolds, 2009) we share as our first point of connection; from there we can disagree and critique theory and practice. There are always some collective ethics we share or we would not be meeting together. These collective ethics are the values at the heart of our work, the points of connection that weave us together as workers. They are the basis for the solidarity that brought us together and can hold us together. Our practices of solidarity are emergent from our collective ethics. When collective ethics are hard to trust, I always remind myself that no one is in this movement by accident, and that no one came to community work to hurt people.

Conclusion

Becoming an ally is not a developmental process toward an achievable state or goal, as we are always "becoming" allies (Bishop, 2002), and continually being awoken to our locations of privilege. I did not know I had gender privilege, because I saw the world in the binary of men and women, and only read myself as a potential and actual victim of men's power. And yet all transgender and gender-variant

people know that in the domain of gender I hold the privilege of being cisgendered, meaning that my biology, my identity and how I am read are all congruent, all read as woman. They know that I am safer going to a public bathroom, that I will not be questioned by other women, or followed in by security guards. This unfolding awareness has invited me to respond with new ways of being an ally and to unveil more of my privilege.

Ally work is not innocent, as we learn it on the backs of others. We work to stay ever mindful that the potential fall-out or backlash for our actions will fall on the people who are the subjects of power, the victims of perpetrators, not on us. This requires us to stay humble, willing to learn and open to critique. Our acts of being allies are not enough, nor are they the end of our responsibility. Acting as allies does not end oppression; it is a small piece of a larger response that is useful, but, on its own, never enough. Allies do not act out of charity for the betterment of “under-privileged” folks, but in order to enact our own ethics and our desires to live in a society free of hate. Our collective goal is not to be good allies, but to co-create a society in which everyone experiences justice.

Despite the absence of any prior relationships, many folks on that 20 bus immediately recognized and acted upon our pre-existing points of unity in imperfect solidarity. We did not discuss our willingness to perform as allies who embodied some collective ethics. In that moment we knew enough about each other to “lean in,” respond immediately, and act collectively and imperfectly.

Dedication

For Sid Chow Tan, for his great-hearted solidarity and creative activism, for staying teachable and being of use across a lifespan, for tenacity and moral courage, and for many teachings given with humility, generosity of spirit and revolutionary love.

Appendix

Two Exercises

An Inquiry into Ally Work: Imperfect & Fluid Allies**Ally Work: Experiences of Needing Allies**

Find a person you have a safe-enough experience of to engage with in this exercise.

Consider a particular time when you were experiencing an attack on your dignity, or when you were the subject of another person's power. Choose an experience that is particular and that you remember details of, not a general feeling. Choose something that is real, but that you can contain yourself in sharing — meaning stay present, not necessarily meaning experience without pain.

Thinking back on this experience in the relative safety of this conversation, offer your witness a thumbnail sketch of this event, with your experience of oppression at the centre:

- Did you have any allies in this experience?
- What actions did allies take, individually or collectively, that were supportive?
- What difference did these ally actions make?
- How did you communicate to allies what you needed? Appreciated?
- Was there anything that your ally did that you would have liked your allies not to have done? (replicate power-over, be righteous or shaming, take centre-stage, or take actions that make the situation worse)
- Thinking back on this experience in the relative safety of this conversation, what ally actions would you have appreciated that didn't happen?
- What did allies or would-be allies do or say that invited your trust or got in the way of your trusting? What past experiences promoted or harmed your trust of would-be allies?
- Was there any way you could have welcomed in some/more allies?
- What have these allies taught you about being an ally?

Ally Work: Acting as an Ally

Consider a particular experience when you were an ally to another person who was experiencing or an attack on their dignity or oppression, while you were in a location of power and/or privilege:

- What was required of you in terms of being an ally in this context?
- How did you get your experiences of oppression out of the centre in order to be an ally?
- How did you get your own access to power and/or privilege out of the centre in order to be an ally?
- What actions did you take as an ally?
- What differences might your ally actions make for the people involved? Perpetrator, victim, ally, others present?
- What response did you get from the person you were trying to be an ally to about your actions or intentions? How could you invite responses about if or how you were being an accountable ally in this situation?
- How did you stay open to hearing if you were not acting in line with your ethics and intentions for being an ally?
- Thinking back on this experience from the relative safety and community of this conversation, what different actions might you have taken? (If you had more access to power/less access to power?)
- How can you plan to respond with the discomfort and possible pain that may come from being in an ally position?
- What differences has being an ally made in your life? Community work?

Stepping Up: Reflecting on our Fluid Positions as Imperfect Allies

- What people or communities have I made myself available to as an ally? What multiple ally positions do I hold?

- What qualifies me as an ally? What ways of being and qualities do I hold that are useful to me in being an ally?
- Who am I comfortable/experienced being an ally to?
- What trainings/knowings from my life have taught me how to be an ally in this context?
- What ally positions have I not taken? Why?
- What trainings experiences in my life have made me less capable/able to be an ally in this context?
- What qualities and ways of being about me get in the way of me being an ally?
- What barriers get in the way of me acting as an ally in these other contexts? (for example: ignorance, not reading the situation, fear of being wrong, political correctness, the “politics of politeness”, past harms, self-interest, indifference, being tired, being busy...)
- What will it take for me/us/our staff team/this organization to act as an ally in less comfortable/less familiar contexts?
- What would it look like?

The Big Questions (To Hold Reflexively, Not Solve, but Always respond to...)

- How would you describe the anti-oppression stance you hold for your work?
- What understandings of the intersections of your access to power and being subjected to another person's power do you hold?
- How do you/can you center your work in decolonizing practices while holding this anti-oppression stance?

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ⁱ ‘Queer’ has been adopted by groups of people I work with, both workers and clients, who do not identify as strictly heterosexual. Using queer as an umbrella term to include folks who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, Two Spirit, questioning and queer, is problematic for many reasons (Fassinger & Arsenau, 2007). Primarily people who self-identify as lesbian, for example, may not resonate with queer theory or politics at all, and be subsumed by that term. As well, some folks who do identify as queer mean specific things by it, such as resonating with queer theory in ways that do not align them with gay or lesbian identities, and find using the term queer as an umbrella term mystifies and erases the queer politics and ethics that are at the heart of their preferred ways of identifying (Aaron Munro, personal communication, 2012). People I work alongside who identify as queer primarily identify outside of heterosexual normativity, which refers to discourses that promote heterosexuality as normal. People I work alongside who identify as transgender or trans do not identify strictly with the gender they were assigned to at birth, and may transition culturally, socially and/or physically to a gender in which they feel more congruent, which could be something other than male or female (Nataf, 1996; Devon McFarlane, personal communication, 2011). Many people do not identify their gender in any way, and others identify as gender-variant, gender non-conforming or gender queer, meaning something different than trans and outside of the normative gender binary (Janelle Kelly, personal communication, 2011). All of these terms are problematic, contested and evolving. I am using these terms for clarity and because groups of folks I work alongside have settled on this imperfect phrasing for now (Reynolds, 2010b).

ⁱⁱ In 2006 the Canadian Prime Minister apologized for the Chinese Head Tax as part of a spate of 'non-apologies' (Coates & Wade, 2009) to various communities. The Conservative government decided to compensate only surviving Head Tax payers and their spouses. This settlement has only been available to 500 Head Tax families and represents only about one half of one percent of all affected Head Tax families. The Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion laws impoverished families and halted all Chinese immigration from 1923 to 1947. Each Chinese worker was required to pay a fee equivalent to the price of a house. Many families were separated for decades, some never reunited. See the Head Tax Families Society of Canada website for background (<http://www.headtaxfamilies.ca/>).

ⁱⁱⁱ The terms 'minoritized' and 'racialized' are used for the purpose of naming the power and intention required in the racist and colonial project of re-constructing the majority of the world's people as a collection of minorities (Reynolds, 2012d).

^{iv} American collaborative therapist Harlene Anderson offers the language and practice of 'being public' in response to her useful critique of the term transparency. Transparency makes a claim that our work is see-through and this is not possible. The onus is on me to make my work public. It is my obligation to show, not the client's obligation to see (2008, p. 18). When we make our work public we invite a richer critique, which invites accountability.

^v The terms 'perpetrator' and 'victim' are used here purposefully to put words to deeds in a particular interaction, as Canadian response-based practitioner Allan Wade would say, and to identify who did what to whom in this event. I am not using perpetrator and victim as identity categories, or to reify any person as a perpetrator or as a victim. Critically engaging with language is required because language can often be used to obscure violence and abuses of power (Coates & Wade, 2007; 2004).