

## LET'S NOT EAT OURSELVES ALIVE

Amy Horowitz

"If coalition is so necessary, why is it so uncomfortable?"

— Bernice Johnson Reagon

This essay is a stitching together of unpublished Facebook posts in which I wrangle with the limits of coalition work, as brought into uneasy relief in the fall of 2018 as a growing chorus on the right and left voiced opposition to Tamika Mallory, Linda Sarsour, Alice Walker, and Angela Davis. It's a crockpot of odds and ends and cautionary tales, but (spoiler alert) the simmering-to-boiling stock at stake—the elephant occupying space in the coalition room—is the cost of supporting Palestine.

My crockpot started simmering on November 19, 2018 when I read a Facebook post by the self-proclaimed Women's March founder Teresa Shook and saw that Jewish lesbians (two of my identities) were among her supporters in calling for the Women's March co-chairs (Mallory and Sarsour) to step down. The tempest in the crockpot was Tamika Mallory's stance on Louis Farrakhan. While Mallory denounced antisemitism and distanced herself from Farrakhan's positions, she refused to apologize for calling him "GOAT" (Greatest Of All Time) and appearing at an event and in a photo with him. Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian-American Muslim anti-Israeli-occupation activist, who herself was experiencing ongoing hateful attacks, stood by her.

Then on December 13, the *New York Times* "By the Book" column featured Alice Walker's uncritical endorsement of David Icke's antisemitic book, *And the Truth Shall Set You Free*. Walker, known for her embrace of the esoteric and fantastical along with her relentless contributions to racial and gender justice,

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is an elder Black womanist (see for example, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*) who unabashedly equates the Israeli government with Nazism and calls the Talmud horrific. Walker refused to denounce Icke, stating that neither he nor she is antisemitic and that his ideas ought to be part of the fabric of human conversation.

The crockpot stock thickened in December with the announcement that the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute had rescinded its human rights award to Dr. Angela Davis, a supporter of Palestinian rights, claiming that she "does not meet all the criteria" for the award.

While Jews contributed to speaking out against Mallory, Sarsour, Walker, and Davis, Jewish activists were vocal in support as well, participating in the Women's March, vowing not to disavow Walker's life's work, and demanding the reinstatement of Davis's award.

The crockpot continues to boil with more oddities and endings than odds and ends as I take stock. Is there a recipe for coalition across difference and anger, disappointment and transgression? What will it take to build coalitions with those who hold some positions that feel dangerous, even as they hold little power and are themselves endangered while standing steadfast in fighting the powers that threaten the survival of the human species?

### **Terms of Engagement**

Let me introduce myself and some terms of engagement: coalition, asymmetry, and disputed territory.

### **My Engagement with/for Palestine and Israel**

I have been wading in these waters for fifty years. During this half-century, I have consulted on a festival in Gaza, enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner in Ramallah, shaken hands with Abba Eban and Golda Meir, felt shaken by a Jerusalem bus explosion, been tear-gassed at a women's march as we linked hands around the

Old City, sang for wounded Israeli soldiers during the Yom Kippur War, and lived with a Bedouin family in Nuweiba. My daughter attended the Arab-Hebrew bilingual peace school in Jerusalem. I was the International President of B'nai Brith Girls. I founded the Living Jerusalem Project and write about the music of Israeli Jews from Islamic lands and divided Jerusalem. I am co-founder of Roadwork and the Sisterfire festival and served as Sweet Honey In The Rock's artist representative for almost two decades. I am speaking to you from my multivocal, always-evolving self, where all my identities co-inhabit, co-inform, and co-resist.

### **Coalition**

Coalition is by definition uncomfortable because it presupposes meeting across difference. That's why Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon counsels us that coalition is not home. Sustaining coalition is hard because we find it easier to share our own hurt than to recognize the hurt in others. To build coalitions that can overtake the deep history of racial and economic injustice, greed and survival-denial requires this recognition. Dr. Reagon's teachings on coalition can serve as a wake-up call to fathom the enormity of our task and the insidiousness of the one percent that rules us.

### **Disputed Territory**

When Dr. Reagon and I incorporated Roadwork in 1978 as a multiracial coalition devoted to putting women's culture on the road, the road did not exist. Building a multiracial coalition in the 1970s through the 1990s deeply informed my scholarly work at the turn of the millennium. I began to understand disputed territories as more than geopolitical locations; they are internal maps that coexist and collide within each of us. My Jewish, woman, lesbian, mother, daughter, antiracist, white-skin-privileged, melanoma-surviving, hip-replaced selves all live within me. I schlep all of this to the coalition table. Each of us brings multiple identities, disputed inner territory, and mishugas (crazyness) into coalition. None of us will get everything we want.

Being in coalition requires recipes to survive the hurt we cause each other and ourselves. It demands finding comfort with discomfort, whether it means being called out on racist behavior (women of color have long suffered and survived white women's racism); confronting asymmetries of class, education, and/or generation; or dealing with the elephant in the room: Palestine.

And speaking of asymmetry and Palestine, I believe that acknowledging the lack of equivalency is of paramount importance if we are to build sustainable coalitions that effectively fight against Israeli occupation. I have written previously (see, for example, my chapter in *Curatorial Conversations: Cultural Representation and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival*) about the challenges of building coalitions in the context of asymmetrical power and attempts at what I call "imaginary symmetry."

Israeli and US Jews and Palestinians who enter into coalition in the asymmetry of a US-funded Israeli occupation create an imagined and temporary symmetry in which they appear to share equal power. In this suspension of asymmetry, can a coalition like this avoid normalizing and therefore obscuring the tragic inequalities of everyday Palestinian life? Is this illusory symmetry a dress rehearsal for justice-based resolution or a denial of the political status quo? Are we prepared, instead, to understand coexistence as instantiating a perilous "normalcy" and opt for the active stance of co-resistance? Applying this principle to other coalition-building frameworks, communication across race, class, and religion is always asymmetrical and co-resistance is always called for. How can these principles be of service as Black and Brown women and Muslim and Jewish women with white skin privilege wrestle across racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia? Dismantling white supremacist, anti-woman, global capitalist infrastructures requires deeper attention to asymmetry within our own justice movements.

### **Tamika Mallory**

Many years ago, I was listening to the car radio as a Black man spoke about self-determination. I resonated with his position.

At the conclusion, I discovered that I had been listening to Louis Farrakhan. I vehemently oppose his antisemitic position, and yet on this long road trip I realized something discomfoting: what he said to his own community about self-determination made sense. The experience got me thinking about the contradictions in my own life and work. At how many of the events I have produced have there have been incidents of racist, misogynist, anti-Muslim, antisemitic, and/or homophobic behavior? Some of the incidents I know about and others I do not. Some of the incidents were my own. I am grateful to be in coalition with Tamika Mallory.

### **Linda Sarsour**

I support Linda Sarsour, and I am not surprised that she is attacked by the “usual suspects”: Evangelical Christians, Republican Jews, and Islamophobes. They attack because she and the Women’s March organizers have galvanized a mass movement that is treacherous for white supremacy. Yet she is also vilified by comrades with whom I have sweated to build justice movements. Linda Sarsour fights the Israeli occupation of Palestine. I agree with her. We may differ tactically—she supports BDS (the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement) in its entirety, while my focus is the Occupied Territories. Still, when Jews were murdered in Pittsburgh, Linda posted her outrage relentlessly. Her fundraising paid funeral costs and supported Jewish-Muslim coalition projects. I am grateful to be in coalition with Linda Sarsour.

### **Alice Walker**

Alice Walker’s momentous works voice the unspeakable, the painfully intimate, the unmarked grave and gravitas, the uncomfortably esoteric and eclectic. In personal moments she read my tarot cards and numerological profile and shared her long struggle with Lyme disease. I circle around the revelation that David Icke sits on her nightstand, and that she will not condemn him as antisemitic. I try to rationalize her ahistorical

reading of the Talmud, an esoteric medieval guide into the art of counterargument written by a dispossessed and hunted people. I cannot. I am discomforted by the outcry against Walker. Does her support of Palestinian rights and her travel on a flotilla to break the Gaza blockade figure into the editor's decision to publish her nightstand findings in the *New York Times*? My rationalizations fall apart.

Here is where I stand. It is easy to excommunicate Alice because Alice holds no power. It is difficult to dismantle the hold of centuries-old white supremacist power. I will challenge Alice Walker, but I will not sit Shiva for her like her Jewish mother-in-law did, burying her son for marrying a Black woman. I will ask myself: how much of my time goes to fighting members of the Jewish community (like Jared Kushner, Sheldon Adelson, Steve Miller) who wield power destructively, and cozy up to white supremacists? I will wrestle with Alice Walker but not tear her down. I want to propose that when we knock Alice Walker down, we eat ourselves alive. I am grateful to be in coalition with Alice Walker.

### **Angela Davis**

In the first week of 2019, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute rescinded its invitation to honor Dr. Angela Davis in her hometown. My first thought was, please say that the "concerned individuals" who objected are not from "the" Jewish community. Indeed, some were board members from the Birmingham Jewish Federation. Put simply, Jewish right-wing, pro-Israeli Occupation / anti-Palestinian forces participated in a campaign against Dr. Davis because she supports Palestinian rights. People of moral conscience, including Jewish organizations and individuals, responded immediately and overturned this travesty, and Dr. Davis received both an apology and a reissued invitation. We turned this one around: When the silence grew loud, we grew louder. I am grateful to be in coalition with Dr. Angela Davis.

## Conclusion

In 1981 Bernice Johnson Reagon arrived at a women's music festival in the California mountains and spoke eloquently about race, separatism, and coalition. Turning crisis into opportunity, she used her physical discomfort with the altitude to outline what is at stake if we fail at coalition: "I've never been this high before . . . I'm talking about the altitude . . . I feel like I am going to keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you are *really* doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core, and if you don't, you really not doing no coalescing."

Jewish activists, academics, and artists joined the "coalescing" as 2018 gave way to 2019. The results: Angela Davis held forth in Birmingham, the volume against Alice Walker quieted, and Linda Sarsour and Tamika Mallory led a powerful 2019 Women's March. The weekend included a Shabbat dinner organized by Brown and Black Jewish women who also spoke at the March. Sarsour and Mallory put coalescing into practice as they traveled to Jewish communities, acknowledged mistakes, and doubled down on their fight against antisemitism.

These coalition challenges continue as the first Muslim women members of the US House of Representatives face attacks for their support of the BDS movement. Their opposition to Israeli occupation of Palestine is weaponized to drown out their fight against antisemitism. I think back to when, at their age, I was traveling with Sweet Honey and building a multiracial organization. The learning curve was steep as it is now. What if each of my words had gone viral? Would I have had the courage to grow as I was targeted by right and left? Yes, there *was* critique but not on a global stage. And yes, racists and antisemites were at work to dismantle our efforts.

I return to Dr. Reagon's canonic speech in 1981: "You don't go into coalition because you just *like* it. The only reason you would try to team up with someone who could possibly kill you is because

that's the only way you can figure to stay alive." In order to fight white supremacist, antisemitic, Islamophobic, misogynist, and homophobic forces we have to get comfortable with discomfort. The enemies of justice are loud and powerful. To defeat them we need the strength and power of *all* of us, even those with whom we strenuously disagree.

We have to turn the heat down from boil to simmer in our coalition crockpot. We have to fight the reactionary forces in our own communities that tear us apart from each other. White supremacists laugh as we assist them in destroying our coalition. Let's keep overturning their overturn.



## AMY HOROWITZ—RESOURCE LIST

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