



FRACTURES

INTERNATIONALIST TEACH-IN SUMMARIES

30 APRIL-18 JUNE 2025



How do we resist and win?

Summary of FRACTURES session 7, 11 June.

Our seventh conversation was with:

- **Shanelle Matthews**, Founder of the Radical Communicators Network and co-editor of *Liberation Stories: Building Narrative Power for 21st-Century Social Movements*
- **Nimmi Gowrinathan**, activist, scholar and founder of the Politics of Sexual Violence Initiative and author of *Radicalizing Her* (Beacon Press 2021)
- **Tooba Syed**, feminist labour organiser, Pakistan

Content below

- Key points from the session
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Key points from the session

- **We are in a moment of backlash to the movement advances of the 2010s**
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- **Shanelle** pointed to the ways that the progressive era of the 2010s in the US exposed many truths of the systems we face - the war on terror as a racist machine of surveillance and control, that environmental justice is racial justice, that reparations is not charity, that indigenous sovereignty is law, that our carceral system needs abolition, that addressing inequality needs an end to capitalism. So this is not failure. The Black Lives Matter movement, #MeToo, Occupy, immigrant rights movements shaped how we understood society. But it also prompted a backlash against these advances. We have an opportunity now, as the social movement left, to define a compelling and materially grounded story, one that moves beyond resistance, but actually sets the terms of what comes next.
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- **Activism vs. Organising: Depth and Accountability** Tooba talked from her experience about limitations of vibrant but episodic activism (eg feminist marches in Pakistan and actions reliant on online mobilising) that burst on the scene and then falter – and therefore the need to work

towards sustained organising. Organising builds power over time, is usually offline, brings in accountability but also requires “boring” work such as meetings, working with functional hierarchies, dealing with folk that may not be instant allies, and institutional development that social media-fueled activism often sidelines. Shanelle added that funding for this also needs to be given more priority. Without this, movements risk fragmentation, superficial victories, and vulnerability to right-wing backlash. Tooba recognised in response to a discussion in the chat, however, that people have different roles in movements (eg artists) and not everyone is called to be an organiser. But we do need (re)investment in movement infrastructure capable of resilience and long-term struggle.

- **Complexity of female fighters and violent resistance** Violence is not something that can be ignored as the state deploys violence constantly, so we need to address the issue in our strategies. Nimmi’s work interviewing women involved in armed struggles disrupts conventional Western feminist narratives around violence and peace. The female fighter embodies resistance not only against patriarchal and cultural oppression within families and communities but also against state violence on bodies and lands. Recognizing these complexities allows movements to hold nuanced conversations about violence, accountability, and political agency, opening space for more inclusive feminist and anti-imperialist solidarities that refuse simplistic moral binaries.
 - **Narrative power as a battlefield and a garrett** Shanelle identified narrative power as a central terrain where progressive and reactionary forces contest societal beliefs and futures. The right has successfully colonised digital architectures by weaving fear, nostalgia, and supremacy into everyday narratives and making it seem ‘common sense’, creating an urgent challenge for the left to develop capacity in storytelling, platform creation, and cultural production that resonates widely.
 - **Nimmi** talked about “the Garrett”, a powerful metaphor drawn from Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, where Jacobs wrote her story from an attic space called a garrett. This confined space symbolises narrative captivity and represents the limited space in which oppressed people, particularly women and gender-nonconforming folks, can survive and speak. It is critical to make visible the conditions of this captivity before any emancipatory or transformative storytelling can occur. This includes focusing on the “narrative ceiling,” a limit on what stories can be publicly told or heard—such as how mainstream media cuts off or censors calls for abolition or radical change or uses coded language like ‘empowerment’ to prevent any systemic challenges to the status quo.
 - We need long-term investment in digital platforms governed by justice and care rather than capitalist logics. Shanelle suggests building narrative power in these fractured times requires three things: 1) combining radicalism with pragmatism, making vision irresistible 2) narrative agility, being nimble, speaking language that resonates with people, responding to opportunities and 3) collective authorship, democratizing storytelling, funding creators of color, building horizontal media collectives and fighting for the material conditions that allow people to dream and create.
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- **Internationalism beyond borders**The discussion repeatedly emphasizes that local and national struggles (e.g., debt crises, gender rights, militarization) are interconnected with global imperialist and capitalist systems. Transnational organizing is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity, as unilateral national efforts will be insufficient to tackle issues like climate change or debt bondage. Tooba's account of cross-border South Asia feminist solidarity despite geopolitical conflict, and Nimmi's insight into intersecting liberation struggles across continents (a meeting she is attending is bringing together militants from Palestine, Ireland, South Africa and other regions) shows the importance of building multi-regional coalitions anchored in shared analysis, resources and most of all sharing experiences. Coming from that sharing of experiences, Nimmi warned internationalism cannot flatten differences or power relations, the unique ways and contexts people connect to the struggle, nor ignore the history and contradictions eg in Sri Lanka, collective organising against the debt can't ignore the partial origins of Sri Lanka's debt crisis in the genocide of Tamils.
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- **Balancing organisational structures: Democratic centralism vs. flat hierarchies**Nimmi underscored the importance of context for decisions on how to organise, particularly in times of repression, highlighting how movements sometimes require certain centralised, disciplined structures for survival and effectiveness, especially in armed struggles or when holding territory. However, internal democratic debate and consensus-building remain vital for legitimacy and lasting power. The tension between structure and openness is context-dependent and dynamic, and honest internal critique is necessary, even if not always publicly visible due to risks of external co-optation or repression.
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- **Need for popular education anchored in reality and radical vision**Shanelle insisted on the importance of popular education that is culturally relevant, accessible, and embedded in a vision of systemic transformation rather than reformism. Education must address the material crises people face while raising critical consciousness, empowering communities to understand structural causes and imagine collective futures. Practically it's very hard for folk most impacted by our systems to participate in popular education spaces without material support. Yet without this foundation, movements risk being reactionary or symbolic rather than structurally transformative.
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- **Building intersectional frameworks that integrate identity and class.** We need to respond to material conditions and build large alliances against capitalism while not ignoring the ways capitalism and imperialism impacts particular identities and minorities. So when movements centered on race and gender and sexuality and disability sideline critiques of capitalism, we risk winning representation within systems still built on extraction and disposability. But when class struggle flatten people's identities to worker or to laborer, they erase the very real ways capitalism sorts people differently based on race, gender, ability, and other characteristics. This means developing strategies that are as attentive to care and culture as they are to wages and wealth.
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- **The importance of healing, 'calling in,' and building bridges within movements**Tooba pointed to the corrosive impact of cancel culture and call-out dynamics within progressive spaces, which

hamper collective healing and solidarity and prevent movements from growing or learning from mistakes. Building a movement culture oriented toward “calling in,” restorative justice, and mutual accountability is necessary to sustain momentum and retain diverse participants. It is through this relational labor that movements can avoid fragmentation and foster enduring unity across identities and ideologies.

Comments in the chat

Tom A: Very good to see the problem of internationalism centered. This is, by the way, a particular problem in the US. Solidarity with the Global South has to be a huge part of it. But it is not enough. The "common good" (Tooba) also has to be part of the tale

Farzana B: As we witness the decline of multilateral institutions established in the aftermath of the Second World War, it becomes increasingly clear that patriarchal capitalism cannot be challenged within isolated national frameworks. The only meaningful response lies in building international connections among feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist movements. Cross-border solidarity is not just desirable—it is essential. This global connectivity is the only viable path forward in confronting the systemic crises we face.

Mark L: I think this recent declaration offers hope:
<https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/events/radasd:declaration>

Katerina A: I think, more than homogeneity, we are in desperate need of a shared, spoken utopia. I completely agree on the importance of accountability, movement integrity, and organization. But what we urgently need is an articulated hope—one that can connect across continents and technoscapes.

Helen L: current militarism is a major threat to civilization and to peace. More weapons and armies will not give us peace, it will create war.

Further reading and listening

Tooba

- Tooba's keynote talk with Judith Butler on transnational anti-gender politics and resistance at LSE: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmLiW_tuyyQ
- Article on The Making of an Economic Crisis in Pakistan (EPW): <https://www.epw.in/journal/2023/19/commentary/making-economic-crisis-pakistan.html>
- Interview with Third eye portal as part of series on Feminist Journeys across South Asia: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA1Ffcf3XWY>
- An article on the rising feminist movement in Pakistan: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1470333>
- An article on "what the left lacks": <https://www.dawn.com/news/1506837/what-the-left-lacks>

Nimmi

- The Garret (on narrative captivity): https://www.ccny.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/2023-02/ColinPowellSchool_CCNY_NimmiGowrinathan_TheGarret_0.pdf
- "Monsters and Women": Guernica Magazine: <https://www.guernicamag.com/of-monsters-women/>

- Radicalizing Her: Why Women Choose Violence <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/nimmi-gowrinathan/radicalizing-her/>
- www.adimagazine.com
- Female Fighter Series, Guernica Magazine: <https://www.guernicamag.com/special/female-fighters/>

Shanelle

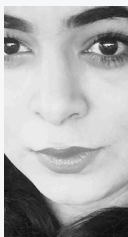
- Her new edited book: Liberation Stories Building Narrative Power for 21st-Century Social Movements, Shanelle Matthews, Marzena Zukowska, and the Radical Communicators Network (New Press, 2025) <https://www.liberationstories.com/>
- 5 Years After George Floyd: Three Lessons For The Future Of Our Movements (NewsOne) <https://newsone.com/6174511/five-years-after-george-floyd-lessons-for-future-movements/>
- Liberal Failures Demand a Realignment: Building a Left That Delivers (LinkedIn) <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/liberal-failures-demand-realignment-building-left-shanelle-matthews-nqhje/>
- Narrative Power in a Reactionary Era: The Left's Rhetorical Assignment (LinkedIn) <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/lefts-rhetorical-assignment-shanelle-matthews-bp85e/>
- Solidarity Narratives in Crises: A Practice Guide, Solidarity is This: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/solidarity-narratives-in-crises-a-practice-guide/id1251648447?i=1000642690296>

And some parting quotes:



Nimmi Gowrinathan

'How do you locate political voice? I say you start with discomfort. A group of men say something, someone says something in class, and something inside of you is like, I don't agree with that. Maybe you're angry, maybe you're frustrated, but you can't figure out quite what it is, but something makes you uncomfortable. Then you start to mark that over time. That's how consciousness builds.'



Tooba Sed

'The crises we face—debt, climate change, imperialism—transcend national borders; we can only address them regionally and internationally. Palestine must be at the center of internationalist politics; it's a reminder that if it can happen there, it can happen anywhere.'



Shanelle Matthews

'The right didn't just out organize us, they outmaneuvered us narratively... We are living in the narrative terrain of our oppressors.'



Nimmi Gowrinathan

‘Our work is difficult and often invisible... If we can make people feel less lonely in the struggle, then that is enough for now.’



Shanelle Matthews

‘The future isn’t something that’s happening to us; it’s something we are narrating into existence... The empire will always try to write the ending of the story; it is our job to ensure they do not get the last word.’

www.tni.org/fractures

