

Power & Privilege

"Without community, there is no liberation."

Audre Lorde

Introduction

What & why?

The concept of privilege - and the power that comes with it - is better understood than ever before. But it remains a sensitive topic in many situations. Members of the UK-based New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) seek to make issues of power and privilege easier to discuss and resolve within a campaigning context, and so produced this guide for organisers and activists to use within their own groups and organisations.

Though written for campaigners who hope to practically tackle power and privilege, this guide may also be of use to people who have a general interest in deepening their own understanding of the subject.

What to expect?

This guide contains some tried-and-tested tools and techniques that will help NEON members who are committed to creating truly inclusive spaces by challenging harmful behaviours (including their own) that reinforce certain privileges. The (by no means exhaustive!) content included comes from a variety of sources and features numerous articles, useful skills, tips on starting conversations around power and privilege, and ideas on using the resources you already have to contribute to liberation struggles. If you know of campaigners and activists from beyond the NEON community who are looking for help on this front, this is for them too. This guide is the start of a conversation, not the conclusion of one - its authors welcome suggested contributions from any readers with practical tips to add.

Who is it for?

This guide is for people who are seeking to deepen, share and open up their existing awareness of power and privilege with others - be they colleagues, fellow activists, or friends and family. We hope to offer another edition at a later date for those who are unfamiliar with the concepts outlined here, but curious to learn more.

A note on discomfort

Power and privilege can be uncomfortable or upsetting to explore when it relates to your own advantages. This is natural and if you stick with the challenge at hand, the feeling can become something much more positive.

Power & Privilege

What do we mean by power?

1. The ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way.
2. The ability or capacity to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events.

Here, we use the word power to particularly describe the inherited and learnt abilities and behaviours that help people influence their community and wider society. Power itself is neutral. In an abstract sense power can damage or strengthen a community, sometimes both at once. It's all about being mindful to how power is applied.

Campaigners are increasingly able to recognise and seek to understand their own power, or lack thereof, and understand how they can use it for the benefit of creating inclusive communities.

- When you speak in a group situation, are you listened to? Do you create space to listen to others?
- When you propose a new idea, is it explored? If someone else offers you a new idea, do you give it room to be heard?
- When people say something you disagree with, do you listen and does the way you address it result in change? When you say something others disagree with, is it heard and does it result in change?

For many of us, understanding power and privilege will be a matter of seeing both sides to this - how we are simultaneously disempowered and empowered by social structures and deep, embedded cultures, and how we can disadvantage others whilst at the same time being disadvantaged ourselves in other contexts.

What do we mean by privilege?

Privilege refers to the collective advantages that a person can inherit from birth and/or accumulate over the course of time.

These advantages aren't innate - they're constructed by the society in which they exist, and can be seen wherever there are normalised power relations. Everyone is privileged in different ways - your own privilege may lie within your genetics, upbringing, current circumstances, or luck. Some are within our control, and some are not.

Privilege is also related to context - you can enjoy advantages in one culture or social setting that can easily become disadvantages in others.

It's worth taking a lesson from critical race theory, in part to understand white privilege, but to consider others too. This sees racism as an endemic part of society, deeply ingrained legally and culturally, which means it tends to look normal. Formal equal opportunity projects can remedy extreme forms of injustice but do little to deal with the business-as-usual forms of oppression. In such a context, claims to objectivity and 'meritocracy' act as camouflages for inequality.

Why understanding power & privilege matters

We all know that white hot feeling of injustice - we're activists and campaigners, it comes with the territory. The grassroots groups, trade unions, faith groups and NGOs that many of us might be members of - or work at - understand that it's important to call out organisations that use their power to treat people badly. If we don't call out the Home Office or Shell, who will?

A sharper view of power and privilege will help us spot more injustices to fight. You have to see it first to tackle it. Moreover, always focusing on what's wrong outside of your organisations and campaigns means that problematic power structures in our own movements, organisations and groups often go unscrutinised. We are part of an unfair system, and it takes active work to not replicate it. Luckily, resources and advice that can help us do that are more accessible than ever before - and hopefully this guide will come in handy as a starting point.

Recognising injustices of power and privilege is an ongoing process. We've all spent many years adapting to inequality and it can take a while to challenge it. This isn't a free pass to dawdle, but rather a challenge to keep at it and get used to making an awareness of power and privilege an everyday occurrence. If you're working through this personally, you might want to keep a diary of times where you catch yourself inadvertently being sexist, racist, taking a cis-centric view, lacking understanding of disability issues, or similar. Even if it's only a mental note, go back to these thoughts and make them every day. If you're working with a group don't just run a one-off diversity awareness training event, but schedule regular discussions where you ask colleagues to check in with an example of a time they spotted power and privilege at play, and an example of something new they are trying to help tackle it. Since the Stephen Lawrence case, we've talked about institutional racism and, on occasion, institutional sexism too, the way in which groups and organisations may inadvertently be structured to exclude, and may, gradually be reformed. Try to work towards a position where you recognise the institutional privileges around you, and try to shift to be institutionally aware of power.

Redressing privilege ultimately means creating a new kind of freedom - feminist Kay Leigh Hagan sums it up for multiple strands of liberation thinking when explaining how evolving gender norms brings benefits:

For both men and women, Good Men can be somewhat disturbing to be around because they usually do not act in ways associated with typical men; they listen more than they talk; they self-reflect on their behaviour and motives, they actively educate themselves about women's reality by seeking out women's culture and listening to women...

They avoid using women for vicarious emotional expression... When they err - and they do err - they look to women for guidance, and receive criticism with gratitude. They

practice enduring uncertainty while waiting for a new way of being to reveal previously unconsidered alternatives to controlling and abusive behaviour. They intervene in men's misogynist behaviour, even when women are not present, and they work hard to recognise and challenge their own.

Perhaps most amazingly, Good Men perceive the value of a feminist practice for themselves, and they advocate it not because it's politically correct, or because they want women to like them, or even because they want women to have equality, but because they understand that male privilege prevents them not only from becoming whole, authentic human beings but also from knowing the truth about the world...They offer proof that men can change.

Kay Leigh Hagan in *The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity, And Love* by bell hooks

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Getting Started

If you feel like the only person in your organisation or group that cares about addressing power and privilege issues, it's very daunting and can feel lonely. Here are ways to get the ball rolling before you dive into tricky conversations with those who currently hold power.

Find an ally

Who is the most open to conversations about these topics? Start with them - it's possible that they feel as strongly as you do. If they're cautious but open-minded, make time to chat about your shared perceptions of power and privilege. Exploring this may lead to a deeper alliance that enables you to share ideas, support each other and change the wider culture together.

Gather research

If there have been instances where people have been systematically disadvantaged in some way, get the background on this. Find out about recruitment practices and sound out what most people's take on diversity is. Is it a sore point? Something they feel they do well already? Or not on their radar? You can shape your approach accordingly.

Use existing procedures

Raise concerns with your trade union representative, staff forum convenor, or a member of your group that holds power over setting agendas and facilitation. See what kind of structured support they can offer you.

Start team-wide conversations

If you feel confident about raising the topic and proposing a meeting to discuss power and privilege within your campaign group, department or organisation, take that leap! Making it a series of workshops or conversations will help develop a sense of shared awareness and accountability.

Skills & practices

Here are some practical things you and others can do to address privilege-related problems within your sphere.

Check out the linked articles for further detail.

Active listening

‘The opposite of listening is preparing to speak’ - Three Faiths Forum.

Active listening is a skill in which the listener remains silent until the speaker finishes, then feeds back to the speaker what they have heard - this will help confirm what has been heard and allow both parties to ensure they have the same understanding.

Active listening is a key practice to make sure certain voices are not dominating in meetings, workshop spaces, etc. It’s a great habit to practice if you’ve ever caught yourself talking over someone else, and opting to silently listen to someone is a good way to earn their trust. Here are a couple of articles to help you hone your active listening skills:

- [Active listening as an interpersonal skill](#)
- [Why ‘active listening’ will make you more productive, and how to do it](#)

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Facilitating

Facilitation is the practice of adopting a neutral position within a meeting or workshop in order to help people move through a process together and draw out the opinions and ideas of the group members. When you become a facilitator, you can ensure that everyone in the room has the chance to participate.

- [Start learning more about facilitation with these brilliant resources from Seeds for Change](#)

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Reflective practice

The habit of thinking about the words you've said and the actions you've taken, considering what happened next, and using that experience to improve your response to similar situations in future.

- [What is reflective practice?](#)

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Stepping back

If you have privilege within the group dynamic, use it to make speaking room for those who tend to go unheard. For example, if you are in a group where you've contributed lots but there are others that are yet to do so, you actively say 'I'm aware of how much I've spoken already so I'm taking a step back'. At a higher level, it might mean turning down offers to speak on panels with an unrepresentative line-up, and suggesting alternative contributors in your place.

Being an ally

An ally isn't just something you become - it's something you do! If you actively challenge oppressive behaviour towards marginalised groups that you don't identify with, you're practicing allyship. So listening to someone who describes being marginalised is allyship. Educating yourself on structural oppression is allyship. Stepping back from opportunities in order to make way for underrepresented people is allyship.

The following articles on being an ally are very useful:

- [Franchesca Ramsey's 5 tips on how to be a good ally](<http://www.bustle.com/articles/53103-franchesca-ramseys-5-tips-on-how-to-be-a-good-ally-pay-attention-privileged-people>)
- [30 ways to be a better ally](#)

Self-care

This is basically giving yourself a break - switching off, forgetting the struggle for a little while, and doing whatever brings you a sense of wellbeing, no matter how brief or frivolous it may be. Being tired and stressed leads to illness, mistakes and total burnout.

For example, if you're working to a major deadline around a planned action, whether a small occupation or a large march, self-care can be as basic as stepping out for a walk or going for lunch with your fellow stressed-out campaigners.

You no doubt know what works for you. Keep making time for it, savouring it, and remembering that **'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare'** (Audre Lourde)

You may find the suggestions in these articles a helpful starting point:

- [101 self-care hacks: a cheat sheet to more self-love](#)
- [Dealing with activist burn-out and self-care](#)
- [Burn-out prevention and intervention](#)
- [Self-care for activists: sustaining your most valuable resource](#)

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Attributes that will stand you in good stead

Patience

Learn to recognise when you find listening to the concerns of others difficult, and then learn to manage your reaction. It's important to acknowledge the validity of people's thoughts and feelings even when they don't match your own perspective. Wherever you can, opt not to derail the conversation.

- [Derailing for Dummies](#)

Self-awareness

Questioning yourself and considering the way you interact with others gives you a chance to subvert traditional power dynamics.

- [Confronting my privilege: the path to radical self-awareness](#)

Showing solidarity

You might hear the word 'solidarity' a lot - it's the act of standing alongside others fighting for a cause that often you aren't affected by but wholly support. Understanding what it mean to stand in solidarity alongside others will help you do it better.

- [You say you stand in solidarity - but do you know what that really means?](#)

Resilience

We all mess up, make badly judged comments and reinforce crappy power dynamics from time to time. You'll call people out, and it'll be awkward at first; perhaps you'll get called out another time, and it'll be tough in a different way - but learning to adjust your approach to dealing with calling out or being called out will enable you to make society fairer for everyone.

- [How to deal with being called out](#)
- [4 things not to do when your friend calls you out](#)

Tools & techniques

Tools and techniques you can use to understand, confront and challenge the problems that arise. If you have something to add, do let us know - this is just the tip of the iceberg!

The cycle of oppression

You already have a sense of how identity can work in your favour or against it, but it's possible that this is still unclear to those you work alongside and requires closer analysis. A great tool for exploring this is the cycle of oppression - a simple model that is highly relevant to discussions you have about power and privilege.

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For example, if you'd like to discuss whether new recruits require a higher education qualification, you could use this model to explore why employees who have degrees feel uncomfortable about hiring someone who has taken a different approach to learning.

Oops/Ouch

This is a technique used by the interfaith charity 3FF in their education work. The idea is to create space for people (particularly young people) to explore ideas even if their language isn't perfectly sensitive first-time. 'Oops' allows somebody to rephrase something which they realise might be offensive after they said it, while 'ouch' flags up a painful reaction to a comment.

E.g.: Person 1: 'Oops - I'd like to amend the phrasing I used as I think the term x expresses my meaning more clearly.'

N.B. this technique is designed for facilitated spaces where the group has gone through a process of agreeing ground rules (setting a safe space). Also, the assumption is that people are speaking with good intentions and causing offence accidentally - while this usually holds in 3FF's youth and education work this may not be a safe assumption in other environments.

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Behaviour, Impact, Feelings, Future - BIFF framework

A simple method of speaking to someone about a disagreement or issue that you have had with them, making sure you focus on how their behaviour has affected you and how they can do things differently next time.

- Behaviour: 'When we met to discuss tactics, I noticed that you spoke over me a few times
- Impact:...until it got awkward and I stopped making suggestions.
- Feelings:...To be honest, it made me feel really frustrated.
- Future:...I wanted to let you know so that in future, giving others space to speak will help with keeping everyone motivated to make this project a success.'

More about BIFF [here](#).

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Theatre of the Oppressed

Sounds dramatic but is actually pretty good fun, and gives participants a chance to learn through acting out scenarios rather than talking, and identify the role body language plays in power dynamics.

Read more about Theatre of the Oppressed [here](#).

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Spoon analogy

This illustrates the challenges that everyday living presents for disabled people and people with a chronic illness. You provide the participant with, say, 12 spoons - each represents a limited unit of 'energy' for a normal day. Ask them what they have planned for tomorrow, and remove a spoon for each activity they mention, and ensure they start right at the beginning - from getting up to eating breakfast.

The goal is to have some left for the next day so they can stay active - so if they run out of spoons, their only option is to rest. You don't really need spoons to do this - the metaphor is enough for most people!

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Making Use of What You've Got

There are things you can do with what you already have. Using your resources (financial and otherwise) more efficiently contributes to tackling inequality, both in everyday situations and at a larger scale - within your organisation or group, within your movement, and even within your friendship circles.

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Energy

Energy is the main resource that we have as campaigners - we rely on it to get through times of little funding, little capacity and sometimes little motivation. It's a precious resource, so where does it get spent?

- A group of local campaigners with no funding puts out a call for support. They need people to help them occupy a building, but all help is welcome. You're stuck in the office but show support by tweeting their petition and boosting the profile of their occupation on Facebook. A few weeks later, you're able to go in person to support another occupation.
- You are working on two projects but you've been unwell and want time out to recover. You continue supporting project A, which needs someone with your skillset to help out. You temporarily step out of project B, which although you're more passionate about has lots of people with the same skillset as you contributing regularly. You'll get involved with project B at a later date.

Time

Not so different to energy. Some people may have a work/family situation that gives them almost no free time, but those with more time have a privilege that can support others.

- A group of campaigners put out a call for someone with expertise in a certain policy area to help them understand the implications of government policy on their campaign. You're in a period of quiet at work so have a few hours to look over the policy and help the group.
- You have a Saturday free, so you and a friend are planning to spend it doing a round of the museums. The day before, you hear that there's a rally taking place outside Parliament. You don't want to change your plans but you know the rally is important. You decide to go to the rally, persuade your friend to join you and spend a couple of hours at a museum once it's over.

There are many grassroots groups, organising with small amounts of money and on a voluntary basis, that regularly put out call outs. Take a look at their websites / social media pages for more information. Groups include: UK Uncut, Sisters Uncut, Focus E15, Sweets Way Resists, Boycott Workfare, Disabled People Against Cuts, Reclaim the Power.

Money

Where work is funded, invite the group involved to use money in a way that supports a fair distribution of power and resources.

- If no more staff can be hired to work on equality-related projects, can this work be included within the job descriptions of existing staff?
- If the cost of a highly desirable venue pushes up ticket prices, what provision can be made for unwaged attendees?

- If there is little expertise on activism within your organisation, but a will to support it, could financial contributions be made to expert grassroots funders like Edge Fund?

Spaces & materials

Do you have physical space and spare materials which you can share with groups that might not have much money and very little access to spaces for meetings and organising activities?

- Perhaps you have a spare desk which you can lend to those without an office space to use a few days a week, or a meeting room that can be booked out in the evenings.
- Or maybe you could print some flyers for a grassroots group.

Keep an eye out for requests amongst your network and offer help where you can.

About This Guide

This guide has been produced by the New Economy Organisers Network (NEON), a UK-based organisation that exists to strengthen the movement working to replace neoliberalism with an economy based on social and environmental justice. NEON runs training courses, campaign hacks, political education programmes, socials, and a mailing list, amongst many other things.

NEON is made up of a community of activists, campaigners and other types of change makers, and this publication has been written by members who are determined to improve the collective understanding of inequality in our activism and daily lives. Tackling power and privilege is fundamental to NEON projects, and we work towards three broad goals:

- Making the NEON community actively aware of the impacts of power and privilege within society.
- Strengthening the NEON community by working towards making it more representative of society.
- Supporting members of the NEON community who are experiencing and/or tackling oppressive behaviours within their campaigns and wider society.

NEON started life as a project of the New Economics Foundation (NEF) but has since set-up as an independent not-for-profit company. The network is coordinated by a small staff team with projects run in collaboration with members and their organisations. This introductory guide has been written in collaboration with NEF.

If you would like to contribute to this work, please get in touch with us:

jannat.hossain@neweconomics.org

Useful links

Here's a list of articles, blogs, and videos that NEON members have found useful for discussing power and privilege. They can be used to deepen your own knowledge of an issue, but they're also really handy to share with others that you are talking to about privilege.

This isn't an exhaustive list and is ever-evolving - share your own eye-openers and we'll add them in!

Websites

The following websites are every self-aware person's dream. They contain a bountiful amount of articles and resources for anyone committed to understanding power and privilege better.

- [Everyday Feminism](#) - a website dedicated to ending all forms of discrimination and oppression using intersectional feminism, in the US and beyond.
- [Edge Fund](#) - an organisation trying to change the way campaigning groups are funded. They have a long list of reading on power and privilege.
- [Media Diversified](#) - an organisation founded to challenge and change the media's racism and lack of diversity - they regularly publish articles on structural oppression.
- [The F-Word](#) - a website seeking to build community through discussions around contemporary feminism in the UK.
- [Transformation, OpenDemocracy](#) - described as 'Where love meets social justice', this website has a dedicated section to intersectionality.

On Being Uncomfortable

- [4 uncomfortable thoughts you may have when facing your privilege](#) [text]
- [Privilege discomfort: why you need to get the fuck over it](#) [text]
- [Guide to getting uncomfortable with race](#) [text]

Articles with Intersectional Relevance

- [A simple exercise that demonstrates privilege](#) [cartoon]
- [How to manage privilege](#) [cartoon]
- [How to be an ally](#) [video]
- [Getting called out: How to apologise](#) [video]
- [Calling in: a less disposable way of holding each other accountable](#) [text]

- ‘When I see problematic behavior from someone who is connected to me, who is committed to some of the things I am, I want to believe that it’s possible for us to move through and beyond whatever mistake was committed. I picture “calling in” as a practice of pulling folks back in who have strayed from us.’
- [When being ‘an ally’ gets problematic](#) [text]
 - ‘Being an ally isn’t a status.’
- [How to address conflict using the Behaviour, Impact, Feelings, Future framework](#) [text]
- [Batman: how expectations alter who we are: This American Life episode](#) [audio]
 - Can other people's expectations of you alter what you can do physically? Alix Spiegel and Lulu Miller of NPR's new radio show and podcast Invisibilia investigate that question – specifically, they look into something that sounds impossible: if people’s expectations can change whether a blind man can see.
- [Edge Fund: models of power sharing](#) [text]
 - Examples of power-balanced funding for grassroots groups, with detail on the processes that organisations and activists used to work together in a mutually beneficial way.
- [Kyriarchy 101: we’re not just fighting the patriarchy anymore](#) [text]
- [How to talk about privilege to someone who doesn't know what that is](#) [text]
- [13 stunning photos capture how exhausting it is to deal with daily discrimination](#) [text]

On Ability

- [Scope’s End The Awkward campaign resources](#) [text and video]
- [Online accessibility tools](#) [text]
- [10 reasons to give up ableist language](#) [text]
- [7 ways to support friends when they’re mentally unwell](#) [text]
- [The social model of disability](#) [text]

On Age

- [Older people’s accounts of discrimination, exclusion and rejection](#) [text]
- [Older women: has society forgotten how to value them?](#) [text]

On Class

- [It's not "them" — it's us!](#) [text]

- 'A radical working-class friend tried to join a corporate globalization group...He soon quit in disgust. I wonder if the group members understood why he left.' Here's why:
- **On a plate: a short story on privilege** [cartoon]
- Feedback from campaigners: how to be an ally [text] **By Class Matters**
 - Put relationships first
 - Talk less, listen more
 - Don't let guilt make you foolish
 - Hang in there
 - Support working class issues
 - Watch your language
 - Use your privilege
 - Have a little humility
 - Let go of control
 - Recognise the constraints others experience

On Gender +

- **The rise and fall of Default Man** [text]
- **How gender impacts workplace experience** [text]
- **Men who explain things** [text]
 - The origin of the term 'mansplaining'
- **What women have to do in order to be heard** [text]
 - 'Men interrupt women, speak over them, and discount their contributions to a discussion with surprising regularity. Here's how women should respond'
- **Transwhat? Tips for allyship** [text]
- **Challenge patriarchy as you organize** [text]
- **35 practical tools for men to further feminist revolution** [text]

On Race

- **White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack** [text]
 - This article is now considered a classic by anti-racist educators.
- **Reverse Racism (Fear of a Brown Planet)** [video]
 - Aamer Rahman: **"The number-one feedback I get from the clip is, 'I've been trying to explain this to my friend, or a colleague, for years - and now I just send them your video.'**"

- [The difference between cultural exchange and cultural appropriation](#) [text]
 - Multicultural societies exert a tax on the cultures they borrow from, to varying degrees. But how much? Is eating sushi a form of cultural appropriation, if you aren't from Japan? What about western trends permeating other cultures? This article provides insights into how privilege and context affects these issues.
- [White anti-racism: living the legacy](#) [text]
 - What does "white anti-racist" mean? How can guilt get in the way? And what's all this talk about being "colorblind"? Community activists share their thoughts and shine light on the concepts of comfort, power, privilege and identity.
- [10 simple ways white people can step up to fight everyday racism](#) [text]
- [10 things everyone should know about white supremacy](#) [text]

On Sexuality

- [How to be a straight ally in the workplace](#) [text]
- [How heterosexuals can show LGBT support](#) [text]
- [The Queer 101 - the downlow on sex, sexuality and gender](#) [cartoon]
- [GLAAD's resources for allies](#) [text]

Quotes of interest

"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives. Our struggles are particular, but we are not alone. We are not perfect, but we are stronger and wiser than the sum of our errors." —Audre Lorde

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

"It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of the pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering..." —Judith Herman in Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror

"If you stick a knife in my back nine inches and pull it out six inches, there's no progress. If you pull it all the way out that's not progress. Progress is healing the wound that the blow made. And they haven't even pulled the knife out much less heal the wound. They won't even admit the knife is there." —Malcolm X

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." —Audre Lorde

"It is part of our task as revolutionary people, people who want deep-rooted, radical change, to be as whole as it is possible for us to be. This can only be done if we face the reality of what oppression really means in our lives, not as abstract systems subject to analysis, but as an avalanche of traumas leaving a wake of devastation in the lives of real people who nevertheless remain human, unquenchable, complex and full of possibility." —Aurora Morales
