

Moving toward Radical Love in Organizing Spaces

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Feminist spaces have, for the longest time, maintained a close link with the idea that the “personal is political” (Hanisch 1969)—referring to the interdependent relationship between the personal self and the political system that the self is based in. Both the personal self and the political self interact, modify, create, and mold each other. While this interaction is claimed to be embodied in feminist organizations, it is often absent in their praxis. In our observations, we note how personal “cis-terhoods” supersede the political “sisterhoods” with a reduction of the political to the personal. In today’s world, where an increasing “gender critical” and trans-exclusionary feminism is taking precedence within progressive movements, it is important for people within organizing spaces to take account of our own actions. The objective should be to not replicate the exclusions that we have been subjected to inside our own safe spaces and feminist groups.

Through this article we seek to explore the organizing within leftist feminist groups that we have been a part of and to introspect on exclusionary practices of these groups, specifically those relating to constructs of femininity. We seek to learn and practice solidarity in the intersectional anti-capitalist, queer/trans feminist human rights movements working toward a demilitarized, anti-colonial present and future. We analyze our experiences of organizing in political groups that claim to be anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, anti-patriarchal, and feminist but further perpetuate hierarchies of oppression. This can involve relegating the labor of issues of trans/queer rights onto specifically trans/queer people, silencing and/or invisibilizing marginalized folks, prioritizing cis feelings over trans/queer voices, and so on. This article is not written with the aim of focusing on a personal issue; rather it is to draw out the underlying structural problems in a quest for radical inclusion and exploring how to achieve that within the political spaces we occupy.

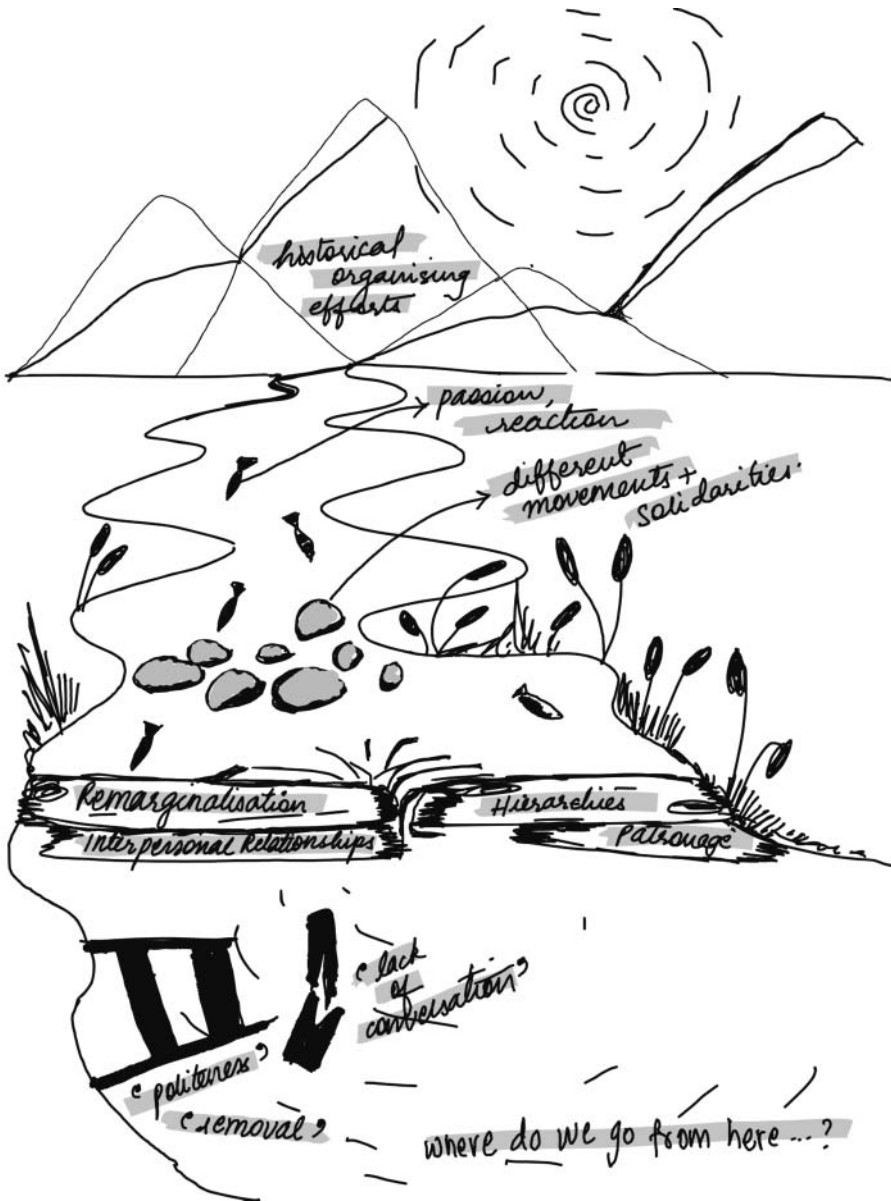


Figure 1. A river of life, inspired by participatory research methods we used to draw out our thoughts on activism that led to this article.

We begin by briefly sharing our individual political journeys, followed by a discussion of our separate and shared experience in a specific organizing space (hereafter referred to as “Space”) that we seek to elaborate and problematize. We have visualized our experiences with the graphic (fig. 1) signifying a river of life (Hope and Timmel 1984) to reflect on our individual and collective journeys

in the Space we occupied within political organizing groups in the UK. The river originates in the mountains, representative of the expansive work done by resisters before us across movements; since we are not the first, and we will not be the last.

We base our efforts on historical organizing lessons, but we run into similar issues. The river flows into the present day, where all the different individuals who joined the Space at the end of 2019 come together to do everything possible in each of our capacities to fight oppressive systems together. There are barriers along the stream, which we have identified and analyze together through the length of the article and in our conversation; namely, in/visible hierarchies; interpersonal “family-like” relationships; and remarginalizations within “inclusive,” “progressive” groups. Our analysis is interspersed by a candid conversation on many of these issues that we had, which we recorded and transcribed for this essay. In the last section, we propose a practice of politics based on creating communities of care to work toward a sustainable progressive movement that expands upon rights for all marginalized communities by talking specifically about the cis-terhood we have experienced and how this affects community building in organizations/social justice work.

Jo: I have been in organizing spaces for not very long, and I was introduced to them because of my combined ability to not shut up about things that bothered me and the speedy realization of my sexual and gender identity. Put together, it was impossible that I would keep quiet about queer and trans rights—they were too close to home. As I kept moving forward through various cities and degrees, I kept getting involved in groups that are collectivizing for political change within the feminist, trans, queer, and sex worker movements.

Anna: I work with groups involving Tibetans and Kashmiris to organize for their rights to self-determination. The people I have had the privilege of working with and learning from/with prioritized an intersectional approach to their politics, and they strongly believed in not speaking for someone, rather amplifying voices to ensure they reach everyone. Since the time I have been politically aware, reflecting on one’s own privilege to understand, acknowledge, and be an ally toward other people’s struggles has been my approach to become a part of any movement.

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The Space was spontaneously formed to accommodate the growing anger, discomfort, and helplessness in students, academics, and the larger South Asian diasporic community in the UK. They were enraged at the suppression of the protests against the exclusionary citizenship bill proposed (currently, passed) in India, which, for the first time in Indian history, makes religion a criterion

for citizenship, thus moving India toward an ethnocracy. The group aimed to collectivize our energies in solidarity with the protestors in India. In addition, the idea was to raise awareness globally about the right-wing authoritarian tendencies being observed in India while also providing material aid for on-ground protestors.

The urgency of the moment meant that the group's foundation was enthusiasm and anger more than anything else, but questions of ideology and practice crept up soon enough as more members joined and more actions were organized. Members noted a centralization of authority within the group in a few cis-women, and one of the author's close interpersonal relationship with them meant she was granted this authority—with limits. The close-knit circle formed new exclusions, defined by the central authority-yielding figures (all cis-women) and trickling down to others, at times accepted uncritically. This issue of centralization of authority was supplemented by the invisibilization of the voices of trans persons.

A meeting was called to discuss these issues in which a cis woman was actively involved in silencing and gaslighting one of the few queer and trans nonbinary members of the group. The responsibility of “fixing them” fell on those who brought up the issues, all of whom were new to the academic/activist circles, and some from historically marginalized groups. When called out, the mediator was accused of “cancel culture” and dismissed. The most shocking fact was that one of the cis women involved decided to leave the Space as her feelings were hurt, which also led to that circle of cis women distancing themselves from the Space without making any attempts to engage with the actual shortcomings of the Space. The Space did not have any measures to ensure the violence was addressed. Instead, group members shared their opinions on a group chat, and the cycle of violence continued in the group chat. A safe space was not established, and the interpersonal nature of the group was not valued.

Cis Feelings and Remarginalizations

Jo: When a group like this falls apart, one would assume that it's probably because there was some explicit transphobic action, or trans-negative action. It is interesting that all of us are pretty “woke,” work in intersectional movements, had a lot of experience with different kinds of movements, different kinds of people and had done our own fair share of work to know when we would be hurting people. But even as individuals, even though we were people like that, once we came together, there was just no space for us to grow or learn.

Anna: Since that has happened, I have also thought about it in terms of how we (academics) are. Academia encourages you to develop a particular way of thinking, to create one piece of original contribution to knowledge that we have in our

PhDs, and then you're supposed to defend it for life. Even when you go to different conferences, the attention is on you defending your knowledge. Are we really accommodating other voices, or are we just constantly pushing for our work? I am thinking of a lot of us who work on the same things, within academia, across countries, and how a lot of our frame of thinking remains exactly the same. For example, if they have talked about a particular kind of feminism, they often find the need to stick to that definition. But that's not being somebody who's working in different organizing spaces because you, yourself, as an individual are completely constant and fixed. While this might be useful, it makes us also unable to make sense of our mistakes because we are so busy defending our actions.

Jo: Yes, and academia pushes this need to be an “expert” and often you can be an expert only on one thing, one framework. But also, it gets complicated in my head because then I'm wondering, people will only speak about things they do know something about, and so they keep talking about that thing. Because then otherwise, it is too uncomfortable to walk into a space where you might not know as much about that specific lens. It's just too uncomfortable because you're not an expert in that. The problem is bigger than the individual person.

Anna: Yes, and the systems we exist in, for example, the neoliberal university rewards experts but not “learning.” Hence, for it to be acceptable to be part of a movement and be actively learning is often overlooked. The opportunity to listen to many voices to enable that is forgotten—it can be good to be uncomfortable and not to know—it could make spaces, including university, so much more inclusive.

Jo: I'm just largely also thinking that this is an academic problem. A big reason the Space did not work out is because all of us, somewhere felt like we specialized in a certain set of thoughts and specific locations, and we took that for granted. We often get lost in defining, and semantics, in being experts, in creating “one voice,” and in an obsession with civility and “politely” disagreeing without letting our organization be messy, fun, and pushing the boundaries of these frameworks we have learned. Our revolutions cannot exist in neat academic frameworks. I'm happy we're talking about that because a lot of the people within “mainstream” activism are often academics, and that affects the way we see rights-based work and our place in it.

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What happened in the Space did not occur in a vacuum. It happened after observing patterns of silencing and ignoring some intersections over others. When a meeting was called to discuss these concerns, the violence was invisibilized

and couldn't be responded to appropriately. Structural issues of the group when raised were reduced to an "us versus them," with one team advocating for a structural change while the other was feeling hurt. This was followed by multiple attempts by some members to restart these conversations and to engage more critically and with honesty in this space, but these attempts failed, owing to lack of participation. Protecting the feelings of the cis-ter became the priority over the structural issues of the group. The idea of "sister solidarity" that is so inbuilt into cis women, for multiple reasons—physical safety, experience with men, patriarchy—is in reality often limited to "cis-terhood." It is strange that, despite having access to political tools and knowledge, political issues were reduced to a personal "fight," again invisibilizing the experience of trans identities and reiterating a hierarchy in which a cis-person's feelings are prioritized over actual issues that continue to marginalize and silence voices of those who are minoritized (Upadhyay 2021).

The above experience is not exclusive to student or youth organizations, or just anti-fascist ones. The damage that is caused by cis-feminist groups that are not willing to learn and include trans issues in their organizing is serious. Recently, there was a video posted on social media made by a prominent cis-feminist organizing group that interchangeably used the words *intersex* and *transgender* while explaining gender. The videos, used as training materials that were to be shown in rural communities in India, are damaging an already marginalized community by claiming that "people are born male, female and transgender." This is problematic because of not only the misinformation this stems from but also the disinterest with which such statements are made, by not involving and consulting people with these lived experiences (trans persons). After the video was released, transgender people consulting with the organization and trans people outside it asked for the material to be rectified. Comments posted by the trans community under the video have largely been ignored, and the only thing that has been constantly celebrated is "the effort" made by the cis-feminist group by other cis-feminists. The occurrences of popular cis-feminist activists not being held accountable for their transphobic behavior by the women's movement reiterate the priority that cis-terhood takes over sisterhood (Feminist Futures Collective 2021; Sass 2020), even though the material created can have severely negative implications to a group of people as affected by patriarchy as them. The argument goes beyond having trans people working in these groups—even if they are there, they are not given the space or power to ask "higher up" feminists to update their knowledge.

Anna: For a long time, I've been thinking that the politics of guilt never really translates into accountability. And the only ones it's serving is the right-wing in certain ways, because it stops all conversations. People will literally disappear off

social media, rather than saying, “Okay, this is what I did wrong. And this is how I’m going to rectify it.” And, unfortunately, that has become an easy way out for a lot of people. You turn up again and the world has forgotten, but everything is not okay because you never learned anything. I think we really need to shift the focus from being politically correct to holding them accountable.

Calls have been made to improve these spaces—which are built to exclude trans people who have been assigned female at birth (AFAB) and which do not identify with terminology that points toward women/femmes—but these are met with questioning the movement and the “solidarity women have worked so hard to create.” This questions the fragility of the feminist movement and its reluctance to include everyone affected by patriarchy based on inherent differences in how we perceive and construct our personal identities (Olaleye 2020). On the other hand, while on the surface, one chants “trans women are women,” there is a discomfort attached to inviting women with a different experience into the space women occupy, and it falls on trans women to constantly prove their womanhood to the cis-terhood or for that matter to prove “binaryness” for nonbinary, gender-nonconforming people. This discomfort with the other is something we all learn because of our normative existence; but it is not something we can centralize, and ignore when we are trying to build solidarities. We have much to learn from the Black and anti-caste/Dalit movement around the world and in India, specifically on the uselessness of politeness and civility when it comes to questions of creating a messy, but just world (Gauthaman 2020; Zamalin 2021; Newkirk 2018). Our politeness and fear of being confronted with new knowledge, as academics, as activists, is steeped in our insecurity of our own identities. This stops us from having messy conversations.

Power, Hierarchies, and Being “Family”

While the above sheds light on varied constructions of sisterhoods and structures that ensure knowledge and power remains in certain hands, the idea of feminist spaces being linked to family structures is also crucial to our understanding of exclusionary practices within these spaces. Feminist spaces knowingly or unknowingly have started replicating family structures that blur boundaries of consent, power, and access to knowledge based on seniority and parenthood. This possibly happens because we don’t critically think about these boundaries within organizing groups, and more attention is paid to getting things done, rather than how we get things done. These “accidental” hierarchies that replicate familial hierarchies don’t seem very accidental then, because younger feminists in these groups self-regulate and self-censor, like children do in paternalistic structures, to give space, power, and access to figures in the groups that “know better, have been here longer.” It is then in the interest of groups that seek to

subvert for these figures at the center (rather, top) of these hierarchies to think about the space they take.

Jo: Imagine making mistakes and leaving a place, backing off because you made a mistake. In this way, people will keep leaving but not do any work beyond removing themselves from that space. Removing yourself from a place where you have hurt someone so that you can give them space, and so that you can move away to do better is important, but with that, the one who has made the mistake should also be doing the work. It cannot stop by moving away. We need to have conversations about allyship not being perfect, about not ever being a perfect ally because that does not exist. We should be comfortable knowing that one cannot be the perfect anti-caste, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-transphobic, and so forth, person out there. The pressure of being the perfect activist breaks down into little moments in organizing circles when you must defend your identity as an activist because that has been attached to you for so long, that you need to defend it with sentences like “I have trans friends.” It removes the pressure off me, as an activist, to defend an identity that will obviously change, and it removes the pressure on marginalized people to keep forgiving. The self-flagellating behavior that comes with perfectionism slows the movement because it is, again, centered around *me* and *my* form of activism rather than the larger structural problem. You do your work, let me do mine. Side by side. To be showing emotion, and asking for something to be fixed is not childish, and we cannot have this polite, romantic version of what activism means to govern our spaces. The Space was one collective where I actually made the effort to stay, even though I was the person who was hurt there, because despite the discomfort caused, I really wanted this to work, and the only way was for us all to have a conversation. But even though I stayed, the perpetrators left and nothing was resolved. It has always left me with the question—“how else could this have been resolved?” Moreover, we live in a neoliberal world that makes mental health and caring for it a solely individual thing, without any collective responsibility or action. I believe that, without communicating what went wrong, or how we could make it better, we just “move on” without actually moving on. I am cautious of being a part of any organizing space after this because I need to know we will stop and talk to each other first. That is camaraderie, and activism needs that at its base—not energy, not the rush to fulfil something, but being able to stay in a very uncomfortable space talking to each other and ourselves. As Adrienne Maree Brown (2018) says,

We will tell each other we hurt people, and who. We will tell each other why, who hurt us and how. We will tell each other what we will do to heal ourselves, and heal the wounds in our wake. We will be accountable, rigorous in our accountability, all of us unlearning, all of us crawling toward dignity. We will learn to set and hold

boundaries, communicate without manipulation, give and receive consent, ask for help, love our shadows without letting them rule our relationships, and remember we are of earth, of miracle, of a whole, of a massive river—love, life, life, love.

Anna: And you're not putting in any effort to explain your departure or its implications. You have raised your voice and said that this is what is wrong in the Space, and that in itself takes a lot of effort, but it didn't change any of the behavior or even get people asking questions. It is very disheartening, our circles are going to be so small, right? We are going to face these people again, and I'm very wary of them reentering such spaces because, in some ways, I know that it's going to be a dead end and it's not going to work out. But how do we deal with this because it is going to happen, and I don't want conversations or the ongoing work to stop because of the presence of this one person. I don't want to give them so much power at the same time as well.

Jo: When I came to the UK, I was contacted to be a part of a collective almost immediately through the people I knew in India. I then stood for an election, met other people in "left" groups, and became part of a collective of students working on university policy. Things seemed ideal, and even my second supervisor was made to seem "perfect" for me by some of these members. After the incident, I also lost my second supervisor. You work with the same people, you have support groups of the same people, you have dating circles of the same people. You all have the same mind wavelength, and when one thing goes wrong, you do not lose just one person, you lose twenty. It's the weird insidious nature of how close these spaces are, how everybody knows everybody. And this is very similar to many marginalized communities—we will be attracted to each other, try to occupy the same spaces, and we end up creating very close-knit groups, and this is further combined with the fear that academics have of losing contacts, reputations and circles.

Offering critiques of communities that we are a part of and often have interpersonal relationships with is dangerous. Dangerous because of the ostracization the world metes out to communities that cannot paint a rosy picture of their struggles, and the ostracization from community members who have rigid ideas of how a community should function—who should have the voice, who should lead, who should be "cancelled."

However, we also know that, just because someone is marginalized, it does not mean that they are not capable of violence. By being paternalistic cis-ters, we end up recreating the same patriarchal structures found within heteronormative spaces. The goal is to ensure that violence does not reproduce itself in a structure that continually ends up shutting down the survivors of that violence. That is on

us. We are meant to be safe spaces, safe people, safe events, and safe minds for others of our community.

Radical Spaces, Collectivization, and the Personal Being Political

Jo: What does a radical space mean to you?

Anna: I think in a very simplistic way, it is a place where you can imagine and work toward alternative futures, which has space for everyone you're working with, in simple ways, but at different levels. I think it involves different kinds of work that needs to be done within such spaces to be able to create them because in my research, and outside it, I feel the aspect of imagination itself is, you know, really curtailed. You're always told to think within a particular methodology or do stuff in a particular way. So for me a radical space would mean a space where all of our different realities come together toward a collective goal.

Jo: In your opinion, do you think that before we create a radical space, we need to have conversations on what radical means to each one of us? And what imagined futures mean to each one of us? And what work each one of us wants to do? Does that individuality matter when we are coming into a group? Or do you feel like we should first come together? And then we can discuss the individual listing?

Anna: I don't have a clear answer if the individual should be more important than the group, or the other way around. I think a clear understanding of a collective vision along with your positionality is important. So in the case of organizing against state oppression, while it might be that we are all working toward the same goal, we need to recognize that my experiences and threats as a cis-woman with caste privilege will be very different from a trans person's. If a state attempts to increase control and surveillance over trans bodies and access to gender-affirming health care, that will also eventually implicate increased state scrutiny over my body in the name of "protection" and health care. Hence, if you have that collective vision, it becomes easier to also talk about your own understanding and privileges, enabling us to see where we, individually, can make the most collective impact.

Jo: Yeah, I understand that. It is a big question, and a question a lot of people within organizations we have been a part of fail to address. In my experience, it has never been a linear process of putting either the individual or the collective before the other—it is a conversation to be had to see how these individuals and their individualities make the collective.

Anna: Yeah, then I think what happened with the Space was that people knew there were these different identities, but it was always suppressed for the so-called

collective, which wasn't ever collectively agreed to. There wasn't any space to ever have this conversation about what is going on, what each of us was thinking about the individual and the collective. There was always something "more urgent" that came up than us working together as different people. And I felt that was pretty detrimental in the whole process. Like even if we would have had a monthly review, I feel that would have been a space to have these long conversations. This is not to say that a meeting or a circle of reflection is going to solve these big questions, but we need to recognize that these are constant processes that need constant communication. Establishing a space to talk about the things the group is concerned about, and to talk about our identities and processes and personal journeys, gives space to discover the common things that we can build on together.

Jo: So most recently, I've been playing with the idea that there is no such thing as a community or a collective; there are collective actions and community actions you do, keeping the collective in mind. I have been through a lot of unfortunate events within my trans community, involving abuse as well. In this space, you feel as if you can't be hurt, as you're surrounded by similar people. But when you do get hurt by them, it hurts a lot more than it would hurt with anybody else. Because you expect so much more from them, you love them so much more in every essence of the word. So when they hurt you, it hurts a lot more. So, what is community at all? The constant appetite to work with people, constantly question myself and learn, but at the same time, not center my own experience so that I can understand my social location in relation to others'. I do believe that if we work toward creating a better world for those on the edges of the fringes, we will create a better world for everyone else at the same time. For example, make work situations better for sex workers, and all labor groups will be counted within that. Dismantle patriarchy keeping trans people in mind, and patriarchy will be destroyed for everyone else as well.

Anna: My focus has always been more on building solidarities that go beyond performative allyship. I think one of the core concepts of allyship is that you do it all the time, not when it is comfortable and when it suits you. And also, I guess, because of the theoretical work that I do read, and the work I do on the ground, the emphasis is a lot more on building practical solidarity.

To enable this collective work, there might be a need for different methods to deal with the different kinds of violence people bring into community spaces. People hurt people, but they (and we) should have options to deal with that hurt in the form of being accountable to those we hurt, and accountable to ourselves. We know about calling out, and Loretta Ross (2021) speaks about "calling in" and "calling on" people whom we expect better of. Perhaps using a mixture of communication methods like these could open doors to accountability that we did not

have before. Having said this, callouts may still be necessary when it comes to exploitative companies and powerful people, while calling in and calling on seems to be a way we could reach out to friends and family that we love, but who are causing harm. The people in the Space believed deeply that they were not transphobic, even if their actions were. Calling out that belief might invite them to reassess and to create a culture of inclusion where they don't feel the need to move away. Radical inclusion takes an immense amount of emotional labor and pressure, especially on those oppressed historically or in particular situations, but it could be a thing we try to adopt on smaller scales so that the fear with which people react to situations in which they have harmed someone can be removed and they can have a conversation. There are always going to be people who do not want to listen, who are racist, casteist, homophobic, transphobic people who may repeatedly harm people. Calling in, on, and out may not work with them, and accountability is a two way street—bigotry has to be excluded from spaces so that others can feel safe. We don't know if any of this is going to work with our groups, but this piece of writing is about trying.

A practice of excluding those unwilling to accommodate any iota of difference to their set beliefs and ideologies, those unwilling to listen and learn, those without empathy for anybody but their kind, those who participate in the active dismissal of the marginalized can create the possibility for radical inclusion.

This is also in alignment with bell hooks's understanding of community, reiterating that "communities cannot be built without conflict" (Brosi and hooks 2012). Conflicts exist all around us, but we should work on developing tools to resolve them with the aim of betterment of the community. Tools can involve something as basic as a sharing circle to a more nuanced manifesto or problem-addressing mechanism or voting for decisions. Resolving conflict should not be understood as having to pick sides, which is precisely what happened in the Space, but a refocus on how to solve it and use that learning to build a better world. We, as organizers, should center those whose voices have been silenced and whose struggles our movements are based on to create communities that embody a practice of care and love for the liberation of all, collectively.

Through this article, we trace our participation in progressive movements within diaspora groups in the UK. We analyze the barriers we observed and experienced—visible and invisible hierarchies of ideologies, gender, age, academic maturity—and study how paternalism and familial structured personal relationships act as a hindrance to tackling discrimination and exclusion in such spaces. Lastly, we dwell on the idea of community and propose a practice of radical exclusion and collective thought to build sustainable and dynamic organizing spaces. The flowing river reflects our ever-growing movements despite the rocks and turns, where we continue to learn, bloom, and wither alongside a perennial river.

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