

A roundtable on relationship-building in indigenous solidarity work

By Zainab Amadahy

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Recent upsurges of indigenous activism in Kanesatake, Grassy Narrows, Six Nations, Tyendinaga, Ardoch, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, Barrier Lake, Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto and elsewhere have been met with unprecedented support from settlers, both actively, in the form of solidarity demonstrations, and passively, as demonstrated in various opinion polls. This is a promising sign that real advances are being made in the efforts of activists in both camps to improve understanding between indigenous and settler communities. However, as any activist working on these issues will tell you, there remain countless challenges that stand in the way of effective organizing and relationship building within and between settler and indigenous communities.

This collection of reflections by indigenous and non-indigenous activists based in Six Nations, Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto is intended to provoke discussion and introspection on the experience of working together on indigenous struggles. In the interest of fostering understanding and building stronger solidarity within and between communities, it provides an introductory examination of some of the issues raised by *Briarpatch Magazine* June/July 2008, *Indigenous Struggles and the Role of Solidarity Work*.

Although this roundtable remains limited by its brevity, and many of the issues and questions raised will require further elaboration and debate in future conversations and publications, it is hoped that this publication may play a small role in promoting those larger, ongoing discussions. No one spoke on behalf of any organization. The sharing was personal. Many of the respondents have chosen to remain anonymous. Those who elected to maintain anonymity tended to do so because it allows them to maintain their safety from persecution for their opinions and organizing, and avoids privileging their individual voices within the movement. However, to understand the standpoint from which activists approach indigenous struggles, activists are identified as belonging to indigenous, racialized or white settler communities. Participating as a member in this circle, I have also integrated my own responses to these questions. However, as the facilitator of this exercise, I must acknowledge my editorial role, filtering what makes it to print as well as how the issues below are prioritized, framed and explored.

— ZA

1 “Listen, take direction and stick around”



Student groups and other settler Whites marched on Queen's Park to show solidarity with First Nations on the Aboriginal Day of Action, June 29, 2007.

[Moderator]: Has working in solidarity with indigenous activists contributed to transforming your political analysis and/or your praxis? Has it affected you personally?

Santa Ahojja (racialized activist): Indigenous perceptions of life, earth, reciprocity and authority have been fundamental in defining my understanding of the root problems of society today.

Anonymous Racialized Activist: Indigenous solidarity work helped me look to my own identity, my own past. It helped me understand how the Canadian state divorces people from their traditions and history. I came to appreciate my own history, so that now I'm trying to reclaim the language and religion I've lost. It's not about romanticizing the past. It's about understanding the importance of having a firm basis for one's actions. Reclaiming the past is reclaiming the future.

Magaly San Martin (indigenous activist): I've always acknowledged my mixed-race heritage. Academia allowed me to understand and analyze the role that mestizos (people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry) played ideologically and in colonization. I try to negotiate my identity without either denying or appropriating an indigenous identity. You see, I am partly a descendant of Mapuches (indigenous inhabitants of central and southern Chile

and southern Argentina) and yet I know nothing about their culture and traditions. When it comes to indigenous struggles, I am asking myself for the first time, “how am I complicit?” I have a direct responsibility.

Mostafa Henaway (racialized activist): I've seen what struggle does for people personally; I've seen that being part of a movement can change everything about one's life; and I've seen the dignity that goes beyond an action, or a blockade, the hope it creates in people's lives.

Stef Gude (White activist): It's impossible to separate the importance of personal relationships from the work itself. The mistakes, heartbreaks, loss and joy of my personal relationships with indigenous people have deepened my understanding of a life experience that is not mine.

Anonymous White Activist: Pretending that the indigenous struggle is just one of many struggles is a problem. It's fundamental to any efforts to achieve justice in this country.

[Moderator]: Has working with settler activists contributed to transforming your political analysis or the way you work? Has it affected you personally?

Doreen Silversmith, Cayuga Nation, Six Nations Confederacy: Working with white feminists changed my perceptions; I began to pick up on their analysis. But I also found that some white women monopolized meetings and would pretend to speak for us, talking about racism, as if they know. I called them on it. “We've forgotten our Native people:” they would say, like they own us.

Anonymous Indigenous Activist: The experience has been very disheartening. As a mixed-blood person maybe I see and hear more because I can “pass” and because I am more sensitive to the issue of internalized domination. It's disheartening because we need to be able to work together. We need the numbers. But the disrespect and lack of awareness of these privileges has really impeded our ability to work with settlers. Settler activists need to spend more time listening and building relationships with indigenous people. They often seem oblivious and careless about who we are and what we face. I've heard settler activists say: “Hey for the Olympics wouldn't it be great if the world was watching hundreds of Native people getting beat?” For me this points to a lack of any modicum of care for indigenous people beyond political opportunism. I've also heard things like, I get the whole “sovereignty indigenous leadership” thing, but let's just deal with the people we have here”—in a room full of white people (except me and another Native man).

Doreen Silversmith: White people go to far off-places with romantic notions that oppressed groups need rescuing. But they have a responsibility here, whether they like it or not. On an NGO-sponsored trip we made to Oaxaca, there were only two Onkwehonwe (indigenous people) and no people of colour. I presented the Unity Flag and tobacco to one of the women there and this white woman

interrupted, “Do we really have time for this?” I told her she was suffering from European Urgency Syndrome. Though of course, not every person is like that. Some of my experiences have been good, with people who walk the talk.

Zainab Amadahy (indigenous activist): I've developed personal relationships with settlers that I wouldn't otherwise. I've had to move from a position of "there are people I'll work with but I'd never depend on their friendship" to one of realizing that relationship building is fundamental to the indigenous way of understanding how healthy communities function. This has been particularly difficult because I'm one of those people who, in part because I've consented to it, is seen as a leader by settlers. Consequently, I've been [receiving] personal invitations, some of which I respond to, some of which I pass to others. I have sometimes felt tokenized and have resented settler activists for not developing relationships with other Native people who could satisfy their demands for indigenous participation or “leadership.” It's left me feeling uncomfortable in my own community which, though I'm respected, doesn't see me in the same way, particularly because I'm a university-educated, mixed-race Black/Cherokee from the U.S. who was raised in an urban environment. My community knows me and, though they appreciate my work, they know how much I have to learn. They are aware of the relative privilege I enjoy in settler circles and it sometimes causes tension. Furthermore, working with settlers has challenged me to manage a lot of pain as I try to help people understand that the way they sometimes frame our struggles doesn't always serve our needs.

[Moderator]: Have you found the expectation that the struggle is led by indigenous people to be a problem in your work? What does “indigenous leadership” mean to you?

Anonymous Indigenous Activist: It can be problematic because of tokenism. One white man stated that it is “better to tokenize than build relationships with indigenous people” because they need to get stuff done. Very frustrating.

Zainab Amadahy: To me, indigenous leadership means that the analysis is framed in the context of an indigenous world view by indigenous people and all solidarity actions are consistent with that. Indigenous leaders are those given that responsibility by their communities in both formal and informal processes. They are not people who are elevated to leadership positions by imposed colonial powers or sympathetic settlers. Solidarity activists need to be careful that their actions are consistent with and respectful of what communities ask of them. Yes, there is disagreement among communities but it exacerbates divisions when settlers seize on only those people who say what settlers want them to say.

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Doreen Silversmith: At the reclamation site, some settler activists came and wanted to fight the police. They yelled, threw things and egged the other side on, getting our people all worked up. We have to live there. Remember, no white people were arrested in that raid but 50 of our people have been charged. If they want to help, they have to listen, take direction and stick around.

Anonymous Racialized Activist: Solidarity activists need to learn to respect the independence of communities and allow them to make their own determinations of the direction of struggle, goals and tactics. Solidarity movements also need to recognize their own privilege and the very real tendency to appropriate the voices of those with whom we are supposed to be acting in solidarity.

Stef Gude: There is a middle ground between taking the lead and waiting to be told what to do. It's a balance— taking responsibility and not burdening already stressed-out, overworked indigenous leadership, but also taking guidance from them. The foundation of taking direction from indigenous leaders is based in real relationships.

Anonymous Racialized Activist: Any struggle must be led by people who know the daily struggles and are willing to live with the consequences of actions taken.

Doreen Silversmith: Leaders have to stay focused on the land issue. Show by example. Don't take bribes or a salary. Conduct yourself in a strong manner, know the culture. It's a quiet strength.

Anonymous Racialized Activist: Leadership is something that is proven in practice, by the test of struggle. Specifically for those who come to this work as racialized activists.



National Day of Action demonstration in Queen's Park, Toronto, Ontario, June 29, 2007.

[Moderator]: As a racialized activist, what issues arise out of your indigenous solidarity work? What do you envision in terms of racialized settler relationships with indigenous peoples?

Magaly San Martin: I didn't come here as a settler, I came here as a refugee. That makes a great difference and we can only know about that if we talk about it. You can't say many of the racialized people here are privileged but they still don't know anything about Aboriginal history or people. I see myself as having a role there.

Anonymous Racialized Activist: Relationships between racialized and indigenous people are not great. Racialized immigrants are suffering, but sometimes they create a hierarchy of suffering and put themselves on top, which is problematic. There's a lack of understanding of how fundamental the eradication of indigenous culture is to a settler society. All "-isms" in settler society exist, but you can't forget its foundations. The indigenous struggle is fundamental. All questions should flow from it because we benefit from the continuing violations of indigenous sovereignty and are, in many ways, complicit in this colonial project. Newcomers need to engage in more critical self-reflection on their locations.

[Moderator]: Specifically for those who come to your work as indigenous activists: Is your relationship with racialized activists different than your relationship with white activists?

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relationships we have with them, they often know the internal dynamics and work hard to be sensitive to them while at the same time supporting us. In turn we support their struggles.

Doreen Silversmith: Yes. They've experienced racism. Our world view might be different but racism is racism.

Anonymous Indigenous Activist: Way different. Racialized activists understand the power dynamics, and are often treated the same way by white activists as we are. They talk with many of us; we have working relationships and often personal relationships with them. We also have a similar history of struggle. Because of the

Zainab Amadahy: It's different, in part because I've chosen for it to be different. My physical appearance and life experiences have left me feeling I have more in common with racialized activists; there is more to talk about, more shared understandings and feelings. I've had to question that, though: just because it's less painful, less risky for me to socialize primarily with racialized activists doesn't mean it makes political sense. And it also doesn't mean that I always see eye to eye with racialized activists or that white activists can't be trusted. At the risk of generalizing, negotiating relationships with white activists tends to take more of my emotional energy. Hopefully that energy investment will be worth it.

[Moderator]: In your experience working together, what has worked well? What needs to yet be developed in our relationships?

Anonymous Racialized Activist: To be an activist means you need to be a good person; you need honesty, humility. If you jump forward ignoring those things, you're creating superficial change. The epitome of struggle is not meetings or demonstrations. You can't neglect the internal struggle; it's paramount.

Anonymous Indigenous Activist: White activists need to accept their internalized dominance and realize how it plays out in their relations with others. They need to stop romanticizing and objectifying Native men and tokenizing "chiefs" to meet their political ends. They need to build a better analysis of privilege.

Stef Gude: We need to work within non-Native circles to broaden our understanding and roles, so that we're not always asking indigenous activists for explanations and help in dealing with racism and guilt.

Anonymous Racialized Activist: Solidarity activists need to constantly engage in self-education to see how they are a part of, and contribute to, settler society. The best opportunities for self-education have come from joint work that takes us out of classroom-type meetings and into indigenous spaces or shared activities. There has to be joint work and struggle, followed by time to reflect on these activities. Relationships need to be more sustained and ongoing. Sometimes I feel they just develop at points of crisis and then drop away. Also, there is a real weakness in terms of our solidarity work with indigenous struggles in urban areas. This is a big problem that sometimes lends a feeling that the crisis facing communities is "over there" rather than in our midst.

Magaly San Martin: It's paramount to shift gears and make indigenous struggles a priority. It has implications for everyone.

Zainab Amadahy: It helps when people understand and respect the indigenous framework out of which we work and, whether they share it or not, allow their own ideologies and practices to be challenged by it. It is, after all, the imposition of outside world views and value systems (whether they are capitalist, Christian, anarchist or Marxist) that fuels the genocide.

Magaly San Martin: Coalition building is by definition painful, hard work. It's never harmonious. There are always going to be difficulties but bridges can be built in order to support each other's struggles. My hope is that those bridges become solid.

Zainab Amadahy is a writer, singer/songwriter,
activist and community worker.