Inequality

My mom speeds. My dad doesn’t. My mom is the one to go to the store every time we need to return something. My dad never does. My mom is blond with blue eyes and freckles. She is a white woman. As much as she is disempowered by sexism, she is put on a pedestal and protected. My dad is a Black man. In my eyes, he is a sacred survivor, the grandson of the grandson of the grandson of a griot. In this country he didn’t ask to be born into, he is hunted.

I grew up on stories of my mom sending a picture of my dad to her parents before he travelled to Utah to meet them, to gauge how badly it was going to go. I grew up hearing my paternal grandmother remind my dad over and over that my mom wasn’t blood, would never be blood, would never get any of her money. The spector of white people pillaging Black wealth hangs over our relatively happy family.

There was no part of my life where I wasn’t aware of inequality in the way that the world treats different people, just because of existing in my family and in my skin. However, it did take me a while to learn that inequality also crawls inside of our heads and affects the way that we think. I used to get mad at my mom for expecting people in power to actually help the people they claim to serve and represent. I used to be confused by the way my dad made eye contact and said “Good afternoon, sir,” every time we passed a cop on the street. The more time I spend learning my own family history, the more I understand them. The world we live in doesn’t justify our differential behaviors based on positionality, but it does explain them. It explains us.

I find Fabio López López’s definition for domination very useful in discussions of social inequality. He uses the word domination to describe situations in which one agent uses “the social force of others (the dominated), and consequently their time, in order to accomplish their objectives (of the dominator) – which are not the objectives of the subjugated agent” (*Poder e Domínio: uma visão anarquista.* Rio de Janeiro: Achiamé, 2001, p. 83, cited in *Social Anarchism and Organization*, by Federacao Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro, translated by Jonathan Payn, 2008, p. 16).

This definition is useful in its broadness. It applies to a child who steals another’s lunch money just as it does to a military leader who orders their working class, coerced armies into battle. The impulse to try to dominate others is universal: everyone feels a desire to use someone for their own gain sometimes, on some small scale. The battle to end domination and ensure freedom for all must be fought on every level of society, from every pair of friends to every conference room full of world leaders. From imagining a world free from domination, I can envision liberation. Everyone has a right to power over themselves. No one has a right to power over other people. Individual freedom can only exist in collective freedom. Only the freedom of others makes me truly free.

Liberation is the destruction of the entire dynamic of domination. It can never be achieved by changing who the dominator is. One person or group of people might believe that their own empowerment is the same thing as liberation if they’re concerned with only themselves, and their unique instance of being dominated. I don’t want to elect oppressors who look like me. I want to belong to a broad federation of self-managed free associations that make decisions by consensus on the small scale and direct democracy on the large scale. I already belong to groups that function the way I want the world to function. I know a better world is possible, because the seeds of it already exist in this world.

Anyone who is serious about ending social inequality needs to stay in permanent contact with the peripheries because “it is in the periphery, in the ‘margins’, that the revolution keeps its flame alight” (FARJ. “Por um Novo Paradigma de Análise do Panorama Internacional”. In: *Protesta!* 4, p. 31. Translated by Jonathan Payn). This means that I need to keep talking to Enoch, my unhoused neighbor who I hug and check in with every time I take the Red Line. This means I need to include mutual aid in my budget. This means I need to be wary of the tendency of middle-class people to hoard their wealth in the name of security. This means I need to stay out in the world speaking to people, not sitting alone surrounded by books of theory.

Privilege is any unearned advantage. I believe that it has no moral value, neither positive nor negative. Privilege is a tool. Every person with privilege has a responsibility to use it, to turn it on itself, to dismantle the systems that created it. Because I have privilege, I can destroy it. I am small, well-spoken, lightskinned, and femme-presenting. I have the privilege of being loved and trusted by teachers. So I facilitate unapproved accommodations for my disabled peers. So I share textbooks. So I convince my teachers to make their classrooms more equitable. I try to teach other privileged people to do the same.

Privilege often comes with power. It is the responsibility of the powerful to give up their power, yes, but I’m not going to hold my breath and wait for that to happen. I’m going to take power from the powerful and redistribute my power (in the form of voice or wealth) to the people with less power than I have. I will encourage others to do the same.

Positionality

I look like a little white girl. I am shielded by my skin, my high voice, my smallness, my smile. I can write “ACAB” with sidewalk chalk in Central Square, and the cops will still say good morning to me as they walk by. I can shoo harrassers away from the picket line by saying very sincerely, “Wow, thank you for sharing that perspective. We hear and believe you. We hope you have a great day.” I say that last part firmly and wave with aggressive cheerfulness so that they know they need to leave, *now*. I can sound like a good American academic. My citizenship and my writing style are tools that I can use to cause problems for powerful people. I can write essays, petitions, speeches, and newspaper articles, and people listen to me. I have the wealth to buy the books, newspaper subscriptions, and time to study that allowed me to develop these skills.

These privileges make me powerful. My less-visible identities – my Blackness, my enbyness, my neurodivergence – tell me how to use my privileges. They tell me that I come from a long tradition of building a more liberatory world. I come from people who imagine a better way to be, and then be it. I come from autonomous maroon communities rising up out of the swamp, and from people who reinvented language systems to describe themselves more freely. All of my social identities are bound together to make up the person that I am. None are separable from each other, even though some are visible and some invisible, some permanent and some temporary, some situational and some intrinsic.

I didn’t always understand who I am. My parents told me that I was golden brown, and that I was a citizen of the universe. Those phrases are beautiful, but they hold very little useful meaning when a 7-year-old is confronted by classmates demanding to know, "What *are* you?" My parents wanted me to construct my own understanding of my place in the world, without being forced to see things their way. I appreciate that freedom, but I know that I also needed more guidance. As a teacher, I want to provide students with a balance of freedom to construct their own understanding and reliable sources from other people like them, so that they know they are not alone. No one can or should build a worldview from scratch.

Positionality is in part about intrinsic parts of myself, but it’s also about proximity and solidarity. I try to choose to position myself on the side of the working class, and on the side of revolution for an autonomous and egalitarian world. While I am currently non-disabled, I am a caregiver for my disabled family and neighbors. My destiny is bound up in the destinies of disabled people. I choose to live in permanent contact with disability, because it’s the only correct choice to make.

I intend to spend a lot of my life as a teacher in a school. The application of the theory of positionality to groups of peers, such as school staff or academics, is relatively uncommon (Fogg). I believe that it is deeply important because I have seen teachers judge, turn on, and exclude one another because they behaved in ways that were seen as unacceptable for people with their social identities. I am still mourning the loss of my queer, Pan-Afrikanist, Afro-Boricua English teacher who received a racist death threat, was shamed by her peers for her radicalism, and quit mid-semester. She was pushed out. She was taken from us by the teachers that I would have for the rest of high school, but who I could never trust or feel safe with again. It didn’t have to be that way. I won’t let it be that way in the future.

I believe that because teaching is dominated by white women, my ability to present as a white woman will afford me in-group privileges. When I enter professional development sessions and department meetings, I will look like most other people. I will look like I belong. I hope that the privilege I bring into staff-only spaces will allow me to elevate and lend my credibility to radically pro-kid policies that are often dismissed by those in power as being too far outside of the norm. I also hope that when I do come out in schools as mixed-race, as agender, and as neurodivergent, I can also bring these specific perspectives into discussions among staff. The privilege of being assumed-white and assumed-woman comes with the pain of my real identities being erased, but it also comes with the power to shape my school's policy.

My small, pale, able-but-not-intimidating bodymind belongs on the front lines, in the danger zone, of every fight. Having power means having work to do.

Change

I am fiercely, combatively hopeful. If we’re going to change everything, we can start anywhere. A better world is possible. We have to build it together.

I believe that change happens when different parts of a single movement work together and play off of each other. I want to spend time in autonomous, direct action movements, doing the life-sustaining reproductive labor that allows people to camp in the woods and put their bodies in the way of injustice. I want to work in schools, creating tiny versions of the better world in my classroom and ensuring that all of my students have a place in it. People can and must build pockets of the world they want to live in before changing the entire world. I want to make enough money that I can pay for my friends’ bails, my friends’ rents, and material aid for my neighbors. I want a free fridge and an accessible port-a-potty in my front yard.

While I have chosen to take a different track, I am grateful for my siblings who are civil rights lawyers and most of the ones who work for nonprofits. I’m grateful for my writing, publishing, and politician siblings. We are all moving in the same direction, although we’re taking very different routes. Every movement is shaped by moderates and radicals playing off of each other, sometimes in a way that clarifies and strengthens the movement’s goals, and sometimes in a way that weakens and even destroys movements. Privileged people have an enormously important role to play, and an enormous duty to uphold as funders, foot soldiers, amplifiers – but not as idealogues or leaders. In many situations, I am a privileged person, and I am honored to take on those supportive, labor-intensive roles.

My idols are mostly people you haven’t heard of. That’s in part because lasting change comes from every person changing, never down from above. My idols are people who are in every groupchat, who know a guy who knows a guy who can get you tables for your event, who can get you a free vegan meal, who can get you to the frontlines of the next confrontation with the state. People who huddle in folding chairs for 6-hour overnight shifts on Commonwealth Avenue, blocking deliveries to a Starbucks on strike. People whose hands crack from doing dishes for a hundred people camping in the woods. People spent hours formatting and printing out the zines and the lyric sheets for the protest songs.

I’m going to push back on Payne a little bit by saying that “everybody is to blame” does motivate me, actually. I don’t see it as original sin, I see it as a truth that means we’re all powerful. We’re all to blame, and so we’re all able to fix things. We all matter, a lot. I often think about “The Star Thrower” by Loren Eiseley, a story about a boy who walks along the beach covered in thousands of starfish stranded on the sand. He throws them back into the sea, one at a time, knowing that although he cannot save them all and his work may not “matter” on an ecosystem-wide scale, his work matters to each life he saves. My whole life, I will just be pulling up invasive plants that will regrow in a year. I will be blocking a bill just to have the same content slipped into another amendment. I will always just be throwing starfish into the sea, and it will always be worth doing.

The one thing I don’t have time for is apathy. We need hope and faith in humans. We need joy and we need sustenance. I can find joy in almost anything, and create sustenance out of almost nothing. We need the movement to keep moving. We need childcare, food, housing, art, and sleep. All of these things are life-sustaining and therefore revolutionary. Change in material conditions and change in mindsets both affect each other and no movement should neglect either one. I will build space for both. There will always be many ebbs and flows and nothing will turn out the way it’s predicted, or the way it did last time: history is a spiral, not a circle or a line. When an action fails, people can choose to be radicalized or to despair. I will try so hard not to despair.

I am going to change the world by doing whatever I want and whatever needs to be done, and by telling others that they can do the same.