

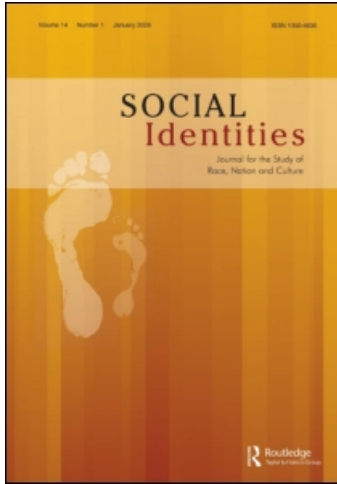
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# Women in Black and Men in Pink: Protesting Against the Israeli Occupation

Dalit Baum

*Black Laundry is a queer anti-occupation group which grew out of the feminist peace movement in Israel and adopted imaginative and humorous ways to re-imagine citizenship and solidarity in a nationalist militaristic context. The following essay describes the evolution of the group from the perspective of one of its co-founders, and focuses on the group's improvisational, non-exclusionary strategies, and on different reactions to the high visibility of the group's interventions during the Al-Aqsa Intifada years 2002–2003.*

Since October 2000 and the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada (uprising), the voices calling for negotiation and reconciliation with Palestinians were marginalized in Israeli society and the mainstream media has repeatedly reported the demise of the Israeli peace camp. Although it has become harder then ever to be seen and acknowledged, the women's peace groups were continuously out there, in the streets, protesting against the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and calling for a just peace in Israel/Palestine. Within this context, even the organizers of these protests found it harder to call ourselves 'the peace movement' after the collapse of the government-led 'peace process': after all, everybody is for 'peace', and for those with relative power, 'peace' frequently meant nothing more than 'quiet'. We exchanged names with our allies like game cards: 'the radical left' or 'the anti-occupation movement', or maybe 'the just peace movement' or simply 'the feminist peace movement'.

As an Israeli feminist activist and teacher, of Ashkenazi (Euro-Jewish) descent, I have been involved with different groups in the Israeli feminist and lesbian-feminist movements. But during these last four years I have found myself, along with many

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others, working more and more in the feminist peace movement, unable to separate 'women's concerns' or 'queer activism' from resisting colonialism and occupation.

I will try and focus here on stories from some of the groups that I have been active with, rather than on the movement as a whole. The movement consists of many groups and organizations: each specializes in different types of concerns, methods, and issues. Some are Palestinian groups, some are joint Palestinian-Jewish groups, but many of them try to promote joint work, use both Hebrew and Arabic, and develop a joint leadership. The same activists may participate in actions organized by different groups, occasionally coming together for coalition work or bigger events. I believe that it is in these small groups that we can look for some new openings, some new ways of making connections and building solidarity, in the midst of this very heavy atmosphere of despair which persists nowadays in Israel/Palestine.

A good starting point is with the story of Women in Black. Today, Women in Black is a loosely knit network of constant vigils, across the country and all around the world. It started in Jerusalem (and some claim independently in Tel Aviv too) in 1988, after the outbreak of the first Intifada. Women went into the streets wearing black clothes, to hold a silent vigil, as women, against the occupation of Palestine. They chose to protest not in front of the army headquarters or the government offices, but in the street intersection just outside our homes. This is where the occupation 'out there' meets women's traditional space 'in the home'. All women need to do is put on something black and step outside, leave their homes for an hour, and stand silently in protest. The message, too, was simple—the women held 'stop' signs saying 'Stop the Occupation'. This has become a constant weekly vigil, spreading to dozens of locations, in all the major cities in Israel and then abroad. Every Friday, between 1 and 2 pm . . . It doesn't matter what happened that week: a big suicide bombing or an army incursion into Palestinian cities, some promising development in negotiations, or extreme weather. It doesn't matter! It seems like a very minor kind of action. No big marches, no chanting crowds, nothing very victorious. You don't feel strong by doing it, but this ritual is made powerful by its simplicity and by repetition: a silent presence, in black, for one hour every Friday, again and again for 16 years. Some of us have been standing for 16 years. I hope we won't have to stand for another 16 years. It has become a kind of sub-culture. Women say 'I am a Woman in Black'. Men joined too. They are also Women in Black.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Women in Black had a very visible presence and made quite an impact. It was the first women's peace group to do so without appealing to motherhood. In Israeli politics, as in many other places, only 'insiders' who are considered 'good citizens' can legitimately speak about collective 'national' issues. The image of the 'good citizen' may be constructed in different ways, but it always has to do with hegemonic nationality, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality . . . and it is always highly gendered. In Israel, being a very militarized society, 'the good citizen', or even 'the best', is the combat (male, Jewish, white) soldier. Especially when trying to legitimize opinions pertaining to 'national security matters', it is the fighter pilots,

or the ex-generals, who gain attention. As for women, the first duty of women in this context is to bear children for the army and to be good soldiers' mothers. This is why women's peace groups often use motherhood to legitimize themselves. Such a famous group was Four Mothers, who protested against the Lebanon war all through the 1980s. They spoke out as soldiers' mothers, calling to bring the sons back home, and helped to create a mass movement that later pulled most of the army out of Lebanon.

But Women in Black have used other images of femininity—women as mourners, dressed in black, but also just women, standing outside, claiming their right to speak about national matters as women. That always provoked a lot of hatred and anger in the Israeli street. People see us and react, and the reaction can be merely verbal or very physical. Once, someone tried to run us over with a car. Often they throw things. They throw all sorts of foods—eggs, tomatoes, oil, we got it all! Apples, bottles . . . and spit—a lot of spit. Sometimes they just charge physically.

Looking at their curses we can learn something. In the first years, most curses were sending women back to their traditional roles like, 'go home and cook for your husband!' 'What are you doing here? You should go prepare for the Sabbath!' because on Friday between 1 and 2 pm is when Jewish women are supposed to prepare for Saturday, the Sabbath. Later they developed into sexualized curses like 'whores!' or 'lesbians who sleep with Arafat'. It sounds funny but it is logical in a strange way because they all mean 'disloyal women', women who are not loyal to their ('good citizen', Jewish men) husbands, to the national collective. We collect the curses. When we hear a new one, it is always exciting. Just recently, we were standing in the Tel Aviv vigil, and somebody stopped his car in the middle of the intersection, rolled down his window, and got stuck thinking of something to shout. Drivers started blowing their horns all around him, and we were all looking expectantly at him. He was furious at us, red in the face. Eventually, he shouted 'Lefties!' and drove off. It was so sweet! He acknowledged us as legitimate political speakers . . . and 'lefties' was obviously the most horrible curse he could think of, such a gentleman!

Another kind of vigil we have used is a laughing vigil. Standing together and laughing in a deep witches' voice, from the stomach. Laughing like that is just like crying, it uses the same kind of energies, and after laughing like that for an hour, you feel like you have had a very good cry. But it is a powerful sight, women laughing, much more so than weeping. It does not provoke pity. On-lookers do not know how to react; they neither attack nor support you. They are mostly confused: why are these women laughing? It is very empowering to laugh, but not always a proper reaction; sometimes it is highly inappropriate; you have to think where and when to do it.

During the height of the violent repression of the second Intifada, many women (me included) have joined Women in Black vigils, but unlike the first years, it felt like these vigils could no longer pierce public opinion and have an impact. The continuity and stability of these vigils has also made them a part of the scenery, we were again almost invisible. We still come together every week as clockwork, but it has become more of a ritual or a regular meeting place to plan other actions. Some of us wanted to go back to the days of fierce curses, to switch back from being 'Lefties' to being

‘Whores’ . . . which brings me to this next group, ‘Black Laundry—Queers against the Occupation and for Social Justice.’ I am really very proud of this group, even though one of our early slogans was ‘no pride in the occupation,’ protesting against Gay Pride . . .

Black Laundry, at least for me, really started as a response to some of these slurs. When people tried to silence us by shouting ‘Lesbians!’, I could not help, as a lesbian, but feel good about it. It was nice to be recognized, and also nice to be recognized as the type of lesbian I strive to be, the woman who is disloyal to militarism. I thought that we could use it further. If they accuse you of something that you already are—you might as well use it. In fact, in one of the Black Laundry demonstrations, we collected all these slurs and curses being thrown at us and wrote them on our bodies. We reclaimed them all: yes I am a ‘traitor,’ ‘whore,’ ‘sleeping with Palestinians,’ ‘fag.’ Yes, of course we are traitors. Of course we sleep with Palestinians. Why not? Yes, of course! Now on-lookers could have nothing more to say. They would have to move on to the next stage, or at least that was the idea.

The first time we came together as a group was in May 2001. The Israeli army had reoccupied the main cities of the West Bank, putting the civilian population under extremely violent repressive measures, and Tel Aviv was preparing for Gay Pride celebrations. We were about two dozen lesbians, transgenders, gay men, and we wanted to stop the party. We handed out a flier saying ‘we refuse to be the cover-up for human rights in Israel’ and invited queers to use Pride as a political demonstration, to see the connections between different oppressions and different minorities in the militarized state. On the day of the Pride Parade, 200 people marched with us in black. We were up front, and it seemed like the entire parade, 30,000 marchers, were following our slogan ‘No Pride in the Occupation’ . . . A Palestinian delegation joined us from Ramallah in the West Bank, carrying signs like ‘Gay and Palestinian—Freedom Twice Denied.’ They have brought with them used tear gas grenades from the streets of Ramallah, and rubber-coated bullets that were left in the streets. We collected those, put cute little stickers on them, and offered them for sale in the march out of big supermarket carts as ‘souvenirs from the Intifada.’ This was our little addition to the commercialization of Pride. Of course, all those who pushed these carts were arrested and all the ‘merchandise’ was immediately confiscated. The police said ‘you shouldn’t be touching these things, these are hazardous materials.’ We immediately agreed and asked them why they were throwing thousands of these things at people in Ramallah, if they were indeed so hazardous.

So, this is how the group started. This first Pride in June 2001 received a lot of media attention. For me, this was after months of working with the Coalition of Women for Just Peace in complete invisibility. We had organized marches of thousands of women in black against the violence of the occupation, that received no media attention whatsoever—it was as if we didn’t exist . . . Then came Pride and we marched in black and all of a sudden we were seen! We had a winning formula; we saw that the media cannot help themselves but cover our actions; they could not

ignore provocative queers, especially when we exposed our bodies: sex sells! This is when we started organizing as a group: discussing the different cultures and histories we have brought to the group, what we shared and what we wanted to say. We were mostly Jews, Ashkenazi (of European descent) and Mizrahi (Jews of colour, mostly from the Middle East and North Africa), some Palestinians. Most were in their twenties with some more experienced activists, many feminist lesbians and gay men, transsexuals, gender queers but also some men without much experience in feminist work.

We chose the name Black Laundry (in Hebrew 'Kvisa Schora') as a pun on 'Black Sheep' ('Kivsa Schora'), because we celebrated being the black sheep of the family, and we also wanted to pay tribute to Women in Black. We used black and pink in all we wore and carried (Figure 1). We used tools from our queer cultures, like political drag and high camp, sexual imagery and language. Early on, we were banned by organizers from performing on the drag stage at the 2001 Woodstock Festival, a benefit for HIV/AIDS activism in Israel, because 'this was not a political event'. We challenged their definition of 'political' by using AIDS-activism slogans like 'Silence = Death', making the connection to the occupation. We performed street theatre with BDSM motifs showing how big money is controlling our politicians.



**Figure 1** Tel Aviv Rally: 'The Occupation is Killing Us All', March 2002. Photograph by Claudia (Cala) Levin.

There is money in the occupation. But not all Israelis are gaining from it. We started making other connections—to class issues and anti-Arab racism, to violence against women and queers, to the abuse of migrant workers. We wanted to explore queer politics in the Israeli context, and we have slowly found out that it could leave nothing untouched.

For me, that was a very empowering move. Not speaking for anybody else, not for all lesbians, not for all women, not even for others in my group, I could try to speak for myself. It is about bringing all that we are to everywhere we go. We do not go anywhere just as lesbians and gay men, we carry around our class background and privileges, our education and expectations and beliefs, our health and our bodies and body images, our identities and histories.

In Tel Aviv Pride 2002 (Figure 2) we decided to go beyond ‘gays and lesbians against the occupation’. The flyer we handed out said:

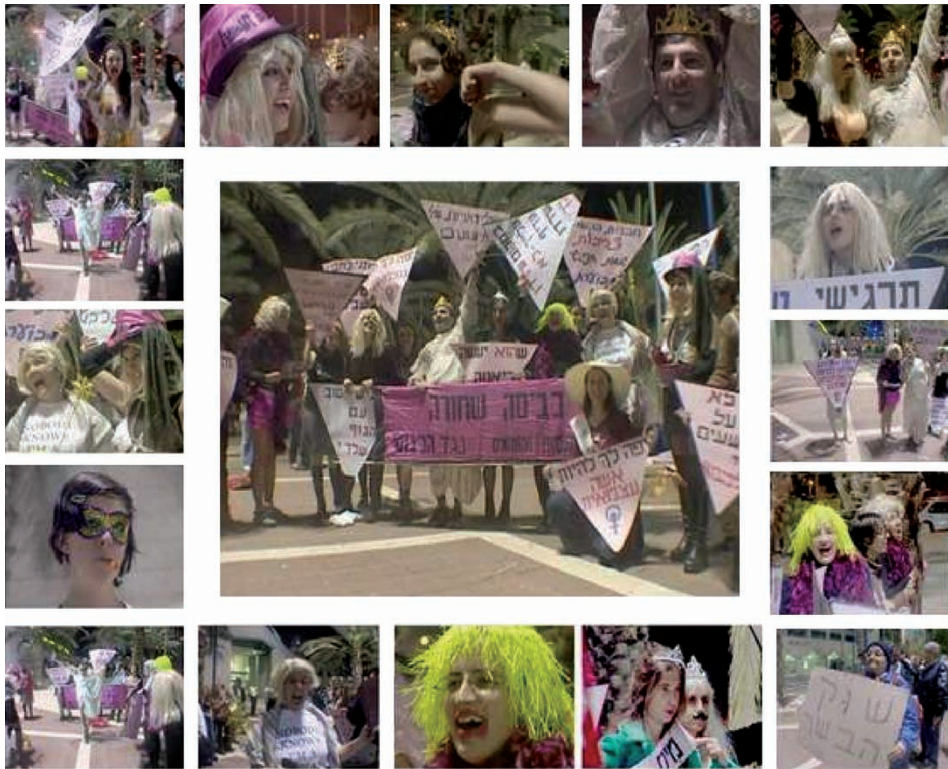
We come out of the closet today as unemployed trannies, as Mizrahi dykes, as poor queens, as feminist lesbians who were sexually abused, as Palestinian homosexuals. We come out of the closet today as sexist gay men, as Israeli transsexuals, as Ashkenazi lesbians, as academic queers. We come out of the closet today as oppressed and as responsible for the oppression of others.



Figure 2 Tel Aviv Pride 2002, Photograph by Gili Pliskin.

We could not agree on slogans or on our own identities, so we used all of them, tying them all up in mock chains and writing them on our bare bodies. We found out that even the most ‘unacceptable’ slogan will reach the evening news when it is written on your bare breasts. Some found out the price of such exposure. We had bull’s eye targets marked on us; we had signs calling for solidarity with the Palestinian people as lesbians; we carried a ‘no pride’ flag (a rainbow flag, in shades of gray). We were making this outrageous connection between ‘real,’ ‘national’ politics, and ‘unserious’ sexual politics. People found it funny, or sexy, or dangerous and disgusting. But we definitely got their attention.

Another example for our evolving politics as a group was a demonstration against the Israeli national beauty queen pageant in Haifa, 2002 (Figure 3). Protesting such pageants is a fine if obsolete feminist tradition. We came there all in feminine drag. Everybody—including the women! We held a mock competition outside the auditorium, our slogans connecting dieting with hunger and forced hunger, for example, or body image with self-determination. The people who came to this event found us outside wearing this fancy drag thing. They were puzzled, ‘Who are you? What are you doing here?’ We said, ‘What do you mean? We are gays and lesbians



**BLACK LAUNDRY>ISRAEL BEAUTY QUEEN CONTEST>MARCH 2002**

Figure 3 Beauty Queen Pageant. Photograph by Claudia (Cala) Levin.



against the occupation! Of course we are here. Where are we supposed to be?' That is the point of it, not being where you are expected to be, being where you are completely unexpected, but still oddly relevant. With people living their usual everyday lives only 10 miles from a violent military occupation, only 30 minutes away from people who are continuously prevented from leaving their own homes . . . we have to remind people of the occupation because it is right there.

The next year, instead of protesting in front of the beauty pageant itself, we went to a working class neighbourhood in a suburb of Tel Aviv, put down a red carpet in the town square and invited everybody to march down the red carpet, be crowned with a golden tiara and celebrate with a vegan fiesta. This, we thought, was a good way to say all that our signs of the year before were trying to say.

We have often used street theatre. Marching in Tel Aviv blindfolded and tied to each other (Figure 4), bringing to the Israeli streets the image of the thousands of political prisoners that were being marched at the time to big prison camps in the West Bank. Our signs equated the blindfolds on the prisoners eyes with our media that does not show these images. This was a very strong experience for me, a lesson in nonviolence. Many of our actions provoke violence—people get very angry at us, and we have to watch out for each other because people may attack us. But in this case, they didn't. Maybe because we seemed so vulnerable, people kept their distance. On another occasion, we staged a mock queue in the centre of West Jerusalem, leading to



**Figure 4** Blind. Photograph by Claudia (Cala) Levin.

a brick wall. The idea was to bring to mind the long queues to extremely poor municipal and state services on the East side of the city. In yet another mirroring attempt, we have tried to stage a passport control booth in the entrance to the Jewish city Ariel in the West Bank. The Jewish residents of this illegal settlement have complete freedom of movement on this occupied land, while the indigenous Palestinians are constantly stopped in checkpoints or restricted to specific areas with a complex Kafkaesque permit system.

We kept appearing in other organization's events and rallies, and 'stealing the show'. This is easily done by using visual cues like red painted hands signifying 'blood on our hands' (Figure 5) or painting your Israeli ID card orange, to look like a Palestinian ID (this, we learned, is considered 'destroying state property' . . .). Many times, it was our picture that got to the papers the next day. Our allies in the radical Israeli left did not always like that. But some parts of their criticism of our actions rang very true. They said,

Do you know why the media follow you around? Why they love to show your costumes and signs and performances? This way they do not have to show any of the other groups. We all say 'Stop the Occupation', but they show only you as the weirdoes, the freaks, carrying this sign, and this helps them to further marginalize all of us and our message. You are playing right into their hands.



**Figure 5** Bloody hands. Photograph by Claudia (Cala) Levin.

Another kind of criticism came from our other allies, in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered (GLBT) organizations. They too claimed that we were ‘ruining it for everybody’, setting back a decade-long struggle for equal rights. Historically, this had been a very successful struggle. The gay and lesbian movements in Israel have succeeded in proving again and again to the Israeli public that they are worthy of equal rights as ‘good citizens’. An out gay man who is a former general, and a nuclear scientist, ran for a seat in Parliament. Jewish gays could now serve openly in the military. Middle class lesbian couples proved to the courts that they were fit mothers and gained the right to guardianship over each other’s biological children. Gay rights activists said to us,

We have worked for the kind of open inclusion that you so easily abuse; we have worked so hard to prove we can be a useful and a productive part of public institutions. Now you come along and evoke the old stereotypes of the radical dyke or fag; you position yourselves outside all the institutions of our society, against the national collective, outside of the borders of acceptability. You are reflecting on all of us. You are throwing us back a decade in the public’s mind, making us lose all we gained in credibility and respectability.

This is a valid criticism. To add to it, Black Laundry could have come into being only after many of the struggles for gay visibility and credibility had been won. In many ways, it can signify a maturation of gay and lesbian politics in Israel, a willingness to take the next step. This next step seems unavoidable because it was exactly the extreme nationalism, militarism and racism of Israeli society that have made it possible for some gays and lesbians to belong and gain the rights of ‘insiders’. It is a society that invests a lot in ethnic and religious separations; in guarding the borders of the national collective. In such a society, it is more acceptable for me, as a Jewish woman, to bring home another Jewish woman than it is for me to bring home an Arab man. For example, new residency sub-laws allow my non-Israeli partner to receive resident’s status in Israel, isn’t it all so very liberal! But it can only work if she is not a Palestinian. That is the only exception. Palestinians from the West Bank, even if their family have lived in this country forever, even if they get married, in a heterosexual marriage, to an Israeli citizen, will not be granted the permission to live inside Israel.

Ever since that first Pride march, in each and every one of our actions, people kept asking us: ‘Queers against the occupation?! How is that related? Why Lesbians?’ and we had to start answering. For me, the answer could begin with the answers we give as women in the feminist peace movement:

Of course the occupation and the increased militarization of Israeli society are connected to the status of women. First there is the violence, the same violence that is used by the soldiers against Palestinian civilians, is brought home to Israeli society. There is the militarist ideology of using force to solve all problems, which is brought home into Israeli society. There is the direct route of ex-generals into Israeli politics. These are our leaders. What do they think about health, education, community? How do they solve human problems? Israeli women should see the

need to fight against militarization and against the occupation if they wish to bring about a different kind of society.

But national security is also already imbued with sexual politics, we claimed, we did not invent this connection. When a soldier is humiliating civilians at a road-block just because he has the power to do that, isn't this sexual? Isn't making them strip, bend, stand on a rock, smile, a kind of sexual abuse? There is pleasure in it—there is pleasure in the occupation—there is pleasure in torture—let's discuss the pleasure in it, we suggested. There is pleasure in power. Isn't this a question of sexual politics?

Over time, these explanations became our main message. Making connections became our main goal, connections among different oppressions and different power regimes inside Israel. We kept trying to put it together: our own oppressions as women and queers in a militarist and sexist culture; different forms of violence and the sexual nature of the occupation; the money behind it and those who have a stake in it; the presence of our sisters, the Palestinian lesbians, and the promise of solidarity; the use of poverty and exploitation against Arabs and Arab Jews; anti-Arab racism and cultural genocide and ethnic cleansing and nationalism and heterosexism and we did not want to leave anything out.

Many groups and organizations around us strive to be single issue groups. The idea is, if you bring in another controversial issue, you lose half of your constituency. Most established women's organizations in Israel, including those associated with the feminist movement, would not be associated with 'politics', meaning taking a stand about the occupation of Palestine and the national conflict. It is not that the activists in these organizations do not care about these issues. In fact, these are the same activists working in the feminist peace movement. But these organizations are mostly service providers to women in different parts of Israeli society, and they do not wish to be labelled 'radical leftist' and rendered irrelevant to most women.

However, when it comes to activists' groups, this kind of thinking is not very helpful. Sometimes, adding a second issue to a group can make the group appealing to more people, surprising as it may sound. This is what happened to Black Laundry when we started making connections. An important prerequisite to such a process, however, is an agreement that groups' members do not have to agree about everything, and do not speak for anyone but themselves. If members agree not to agree and make as many connections as possible, the strangest things can happen . . . There was a man who came to the group and presented himself,

I am not gay, and I do not care much about the occupation.

*So [we asked] What brings you to a group of queers against the occupation?*

Well, I am very interested in environmental issues and how military bases pollute our environment . . . I feel as if I cannot talk about this connection in other groups. When I go to environmental groups they do not want to take on 'political' issues and discuss militarization. When I go to anti-occupation groups they do not consider the environment an important priority.

In Jerusalem Pride in 2002, we made flyers in seven different languages, speaking to the many separate communities in this conflicted city, protesting against the title given by the organizers to the Jerusalem Pride events: 'Love without Borders'. We wanted to make the borders more visible. Two of us marched with a wheelchair, to mark the fact that the route was not wheelchair accessible. Some carried signs in Yiddish, in solidarity with the ultra-orthodox Jewish community of Jerusalem, a very poor and ostracized community. Yes, gay men in solidarity with the ultra-orthodox religious, I know—this is an unusual solidarity, and you cannot march naked in an orthodox neighbourhood claiming solidarity . . .

We have found that a show of solidarity sometimes dictates that you do NOT bring everything that you are to everywhere you go. Our more radical connections called for solidarity work with groups that were not associated with queer activism before, groups that were considered more conservative. When invited to join an event commemorating the Nakba, or the Palestinian disaster of 1948, we were exulted, because we knew that the religious Muslim party was one of the organizers. We marched as a group in a Palestinian town, handing out flyers explaining who we were, and how we see our connection to the Nakba. People in the street were curious and respectful. When we were conspicuously NOT invited to participate in that same event in the following year, other groups decided to show solidarity with us, and not participate as groups either. We still have a long way to go, but when we see our liberation as connected to the liberation of others, others might see that connection too, and along the way we might collect the most unexpected of allies, allies that we might desperately need in the future.