

Radical Radix: Uprooting Empire Through Joyful Militancy

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis researches how joy is sustained in activist praxis through the concept of *joyful militancy*, a form of collective resistance grounded in affect and relationality. It draws on militant research, specifically focus group discussions with activists, to explore how joy emerges not despite grief or anger but through them in good compositions. Using the metaphor of a garden, I conceptualize the conditions for joyful militancy as rich *soil* (structure and openness), *rain* (grief and anger), and *sunlight* (care and relational practices). This research reveals that joy is a necessary and cultivated condition that allows movements to be sustainable. Against the backdrop of rigid radicalism (purity, rigid ideological correctness, and burnout) and the isolating logic of Empire, joy becomes a form of disobedience that holds people together and keeps them coming back. Rather than providing a blueprint, this thesis offers an invitation to think with others about how we resist together, and how we can grow and sustain something we can love.

Keywords: Activism, Collective, Joyful Militancy, Composition, Rigid Radicalism

“Love has never been a popular movement. And no one’s ever wanted, really, to be free. The world is held together, really it is held together, by the love and the passion of a very few people. Otherwise, of course, you can despair. Walk down the street of any city, any afternoon, and look around you. What you’ve got to remember is what you’re looking at is also you. Everyone you’re looking at is also you. You could be that person. You could be that monster, you could be that cop. And you have to decide, in yourself, not to be.”

James Baldwin, 1970

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Introduction

In January 2024, I had to choose a topic for my Bachelor's thesis. For weeks, I struggled, mainly wondering what I did *not* find relevant to write about. That was until someone asked me, "What are you angry about?" And, my, there was so much. I enjoyed the courses I took during those three years, most of which were critical thinking, feminist, decolonial, and philosophy classes. I truly enjoy learning and growing as a person, and theory has played a significant role in this process. However, I felt as though the knowledge I had was 'floating in the air' and did not necessarily, on its own, provide me with the growth I was seeking. So, naturally, I tried to use it in my daily life by becoming an activist. And, of course, as soon as we wanted to protest for, for example, Palestine at the university, we were suppressed. I kept thinking, "So you teach us all of these things and expect us to sit by, do nothing, and keep quiet?" I wanted to explore how to reconcile theory and praxis and how we can move from reflection to action. Therefore, I researched how we can ask ourselves, "What am I to do, what more shall I do, and how will it work?"

My main takeaway from this research was that it was too focused on individual responsibility. We need to find others and work together to push for change. We do not exist in the world alone and cannot make it 'right' ourselves. We need to share our knowledge and discuss it with others.

"Otherwise, our efforts will only stay small and isolated. Tapping into collective energies, historical archives, and solidarities is crucial. Creating change occurs through synergy—working together, seeking each other out, and combining efforts. This is not just about 'fixing' the world alone but doing it together" (Baars, 2024, p. 26).

I started becoming part of a couple of activist groups where I could find people who shared my anger, yet I had never been in spaces where anger could coexist so beautifully with a certain love, a type of passion. These people were here because they truly believed there was still so much to fight for, even when it almost felt like everything was hopeless to me, and I felt powerless. However, with them, I felt the strength to keep struggling. This is a collective struggle, a collective power, or the sustainment of *joy*, asking ourselves how we can continue fighting in ways that give us strength instead of draining us. This joy is not about ignoring anger or despair but about holding them alongside care and a shared purpose because we otherwise get stuck in policing each other and ourselves for being 'not good enough.' This, in

turn, can lead to harmful ways of being together and result in exhaustion, depression, or burnout. So, we need to find ways to combat this. After all, most of us do not merely do this for fun. No one is protesting, organizing, or risking themselves because it is enjoyable. So I asked myself, how do we make this bearable, even joyful, not because it is easier, but because otherwise we will not last?

Montgomery and bergman (2017) have termed the collective struggle of working through despair toward a shared purpose *joyful militancy*. Joyful militancy is activism that sustains resistance through care, love, and collective joy rather than relying solely on anger or struggle. Therefore, my research question is: *How is joyful militancy sustained in activism?*

Here, I use the word *sustain* for a couple of reasons. The Cambridge Dictionary provides five definitions for “sustain”: to cause or allow something to continue for a period of time; to keep alive; to suffer or experience, especially damage or loss; and to support emotionally. These fit very well with the concept of joy as a (collective) growth of capacity, a struggle through and within pain, feeling affect and tuning in, and continuing to struggle even when all seems lost. When placed in the context of joyful militancy, it is about coming together and creating new alternatives out of love without backing down.

Theoretical framework

Since becoming more active in activism, I have often felt insecure about not being radical or smart enough to do activism ‘correctly.’ It is quite common to experience this feeling, which leads to a very uncomfortable and stressed feeling. Montgomery and bergman (2017) have termed this phenomenon *rigid radicalism*:

“It is the pleasure of feeling more radical than others and the worry about not being radical enough; [...] the vigilant perception of errors and complicities in oneself and others; [...] the highs of being liked and the lows of being ignored; the suspicion and resentment felt in the presence of something new; the way curiosity feels naïve and condescension feels right” (ibid., p. 4).

They describe this as an isolating form of despair to the benefit of *Empire*, which they define as

“the organized destruction under which we live. Through its attempt to render everything profitable and controllable, Empire administers a war with other forms of life. The rhythms it imposes are at once absorptive and isolating. [...] Empire works to monopolize the whole field of life, crushing autonomy and inducing dependence” (p. 25).

In my research, I will examine rigid radicalism to help establish a scope on how activism can be fueled by anger and struggle rather than care, love, and collective joy, identify the pitfalls, and explore how activists can combat this phenomenon. Rigid radicalism can lead to burnout or the feeling that nothing is ever enough. It thrives in spaces with no room for mistakes, where self-righteousness and moral perfectionism create toxic ways of relating. It becomes exhausting to live in this state constantly, and it is often a reason why people stop doing activism. Nevertheless, Montgomery and bergman do not write entirely *against* rigid radicalism because they believe that it cannot be countered by critique, as we would get stuck in a spiral of shame. This is because they believe that continuously using critique to point out inconsistencies, mistakes, shame, etc., does not make them go away but makes them worse, leading to paralysis. Instead, they want to open up the questions “How can we be otherwise? What makes it possible to activate something different?” (p. 23), and how can we do so when Empire is “always adapting and reacting” (p. 25)?

According to them, there are always cracks at the margins of Empire where we can fight off its control. “Uncertainty is where we need to begin, because experimentation and curiosity is part of what has been stolen from us. Empire works in part by making us feel

impotent” and powerless (p. 33), stopping us from believing we can combine our efforts to shape new worlds together. This is how the Empire functions, leaving us paralyzed, waiting for disaster to strike and letting it. To resist this, they suggest building autonomy, trust, and collective power. These, I argue, are essential to sustaining *joyful militancy*. But what does this joyful militancy mean?

For their interpretation of the concept of joy, Montgomery and bergman draw heavily on Baruch Spinoza, who configured the world as interconnected and constantly in process. To him, the reason life exists is *joy* (Montgomery and bergman, 2017, p. 29). It is important not to confuse joy with happiness, however, as they do not mean the same thing. “Under Empire, happiness is seen as duty and unhappiness as a disorder” (ibid., p. 56). Unhappiness, rage, and despair are pathologized and treated as individual disorders that we have to fix or at least manage ourselves. Happiness is the act we have to perform to function, used as a numbing anesthetic. Joy may *contain* happiness, but it also contains so much more: pain, drama, love, etcetera. It is never comfortable; it always pushes us to move, to do more, to feel more. It is “the growth of people’s capacity to do and feel new things” (p. 60), and it is not about an absence of pain but about the struggle within and through it, becoming present in it and allowing the affects to be felt, tuning in to them. Through this, joy erupts from ‘negative’ emotions (pp. 62-63).

There is no one way to go about experiencing joy: it only exists in certain contexts; therefore, no framework works in every case, and there is no right or wrong way to do it. Montgomery and bergman argue that this joy can be found “when people find themselves genuinely supported and cared for, [and] they are [then] able to extend this to others in ways that seemed impossible or terrifying before” (p. 31): this is that beautiful coexistence of anger and joy, hate and love. When people’s anger and misery resonate with others, they discover ways to struggle together because they are similarly entwined. Sustaining each other through grief, conflict, and uncertainty is not separate from joy but rather one of its strongest expressions. Joy is something I was able to find many times in activism, but I am primarily concerned with how this joy is experienced, expressed, and sustained in activist spaces, how it may or may not resist burnout and rigid radicalism, and where and how it emerges in protests, actions, community gatherings, or in other moments of collective care.

Because of this hatred for existing ways of oppression, people coming together and creating joy can be dangerous. This is where *militancy* comes in. To Montgomery and bergman, militancy means a “combateness and a willingness to fight” through various means, such as sitting with one’s trauma, supporting a friend, or refusing to participate (p.

30). Through struggling together, for example, in activism, people become empowered and reduce their dependence on the Empire, fostering flourishing collective responsibility and autonomy. “Joyful militancy is a dangerous, transformative, and experimental progress, generated collectively and held gently” (p. 34). Furthermore, the *situated militant* is one who “struggles for justice in the situation” and adapts to situations and relationships (Sebastián Touza in Montgomery & bergman, 2017, p. 75). Rather than following rigid, predefined ideologies, they adjust and learn collectively. They are bound by the relationships surrounding them in which they share intimate emotions. In my research, I will seek out these situated militants and aim to explore how they navigate the tensions, their positionality, and transformations in their militancy, as well as how they cultivate joy and resilience in their militant praxes, focusing on collective care to sustain the long-term struggle.

Central to joyful militancy is *joyful transformation*. This emerges when struggle creates a sense of *collective power*, where “we” feel stronger and more capable. Collective power stands at the core of collective resistance and is

“not satisfaction with things as they are. It’s part of feeling power’s capacities growing in you and growing in the people around you. It’s a feeling, a passion, that comes from a process of transformation. And it’s a process of growth. [...] So you feel that you have the power to change and you feel yourself changing with what you’re doing, together with other people” (Silvia Federici in Montgomery & bergman, 2017, p. 249).

Using joyful transformation and collective power will provide the tools to demonstrate how activists can shift their perspectives, strategies, or emotions when crossing paths with one another, changing themselves and the people around them; despair turning into action, rigid radicalism softening, or anger coexisting with love. Being, doing together with other people might be what loosens the grip of Empire around our necks. It is what gives us *freedom*. The meaning of the word’s origin is closely tied to friendship, interconnectedness, love, fighting together, and a shared power that grows (Montgomery & bergman, 2017, p. 83 & p. 85).

Now, thanks to western philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes, it has come to mean something else entirely: individuality, selfishness, and a lack of regulations. This isolated individual constantly fears for themselves and, not unimportantly, their possessions and is disconnected from the people and Nature around them.

Nevertheless, Spinoza, a contemporary of Hobbes and Descartes, adopted an entirely different perspective in his work, *Ethics* (1677). He saw the entire world as alive and composed of interconnected beings constantly interacting with one another. This means we

are all living in a dynamic web of interactions, so we affect and are affected by everything around us. “There is no individual that comes before the dense network of relations in which we’re embedded” (Montgomery & bergman, 2017, p. 91). To him, philosophy is, therefore, grounded in affect, which does not just entail feelings but also changes in our capacity to act. This affect is never uniformly right or wrong for everyone, but this does not mean we can all do whatever we want. He means the opposite: realizing how interdependent we are means we become only more capable of trusting in our relationships and the world around us. “This fidelity is not moral: it is *ethical*” (ibid., p. 88). Where morality asks and seeks to answer, “What should one do?” Spinozan ethics asks, “What is one capable of?” and the answer can only be found through attunement with one’s surroundings and experimentation right from where one is. “In trying, whether you “succeed” or “fail,” you will have learned and changed, and the situation will have changed, even if only slightly” (p. 89). This means that *freedom* now takes on the meaning of growing what we are capable of doing and feeling together. We form intense bonds between humans and Nature and become part of each other’s struggles. Due to these interrelations, we grow our capacity to question Empire and develop new praxes that resist and undermine it. According to Spinoza, these interrelations generate joy when they are in a good composition where elements align in a way that is pleasing and effective, thereby creating a sense of balance. This concept of freedom will enable me to explore the discoveries of new capacities and how activists sustain them through collective activism.

So, *joyful militancy* is

“an attunement and activation of collective power that looks different everywhere, because everywhere is different. [...] It is expressed in quiet forms of subversion and sabotage, as well as all the forms of care, connection, and support that defy the isolation and violence of Empire. It is not a question of being a certain way, but a question of open-ended becoming, starting from wherever people find themselves” (p. 78).

It only occurs through relationships; it is the product of it. It is a refusal to numb oneself or to individualize suffering. It allows ‘negative’ emotions to exist but channels it into a fight. Nevertheless, this fight never happens alone. And during this fight, we will mess up sometimes. We will not be perfect or fully decolonized, and we will still think in destructive ways. Here, we must be careful not to fall into rigid radicalism but instead focus on asking ourselves and each other, “How can we be otherwise? What makes it possible to activate something different? What are we capable of?”

Methodology

Militant research

I used the participatory action research (PAR) methodology in my last thesis. In PAR, people with lived experiences of a subject are invited to actively participate as co-researchers, co-creating new knowledge and acting upon findings to improve their lives (Lenette, 2022, p. 1). PAR aims to reinterpret what constitutes knowledge, who is an expert, and, consequently, who gets to ask the questions. However, after reading *The Militant Research Handbook* (2013) by Bookchin et al., I decided to take this further: I wanted to be a more vocal advocate for new forms of collective praxis and visibility and find ways to make certain issues more visible, thus identifying them as potential sites of radical change. Militant research (MR) “works in and with the movements it is concerned with” (ibid., p. 6), blending research with action: researchers become part of the struggle, not just as observers, advocates, allies, or facilitators. *Colectivo Situaciones* and the Movement of Unemployed Workers of Solano (MTD Solano) (2023) define MR as a collaborative, politically engaged method that actively supports social struggle and collective resistance, unlike traditional academic research, which often maintains a detached, neutral, or ‘objective’ stance. MR researchers work alongside participants, not as neutral observers but as co-creators of knowledge who share the risks, commitments, and goals of the movement. Participants and their lived experiences are not just objects of study but co-investigators shaping both the process and its outcomes. MR aims to be experimental and open-ended, embracing a commitment to social transformation through direct engagement and the production of useful knowledge in struggles for justice, rights, or autonomy. It rejects the activist/academic split, as it is the conscious and intentional attempt “to make movements move through a reflexive [...] critique of their own praxis” (Russell, 2014, p. 223). This fits as there is no ‘critical distance’ between me, the ‘researcher,’ and my research, or the ‘object’ of it. I am already part of the milieu, and my academic and political concerns overlap entirely (if they can even be separated).

I used MR in an attempt to co-create rather than extract knowledge. I am aware that writing a research paper for a university is inherently extractivist, as the university has established its legitimacy through colonial structures of knowledge extraction, where knowledge is viewed as something to be found ‘out there’ rather than in the embodied praxes of researchers themselves. Nevertheless, I wanted to mitigate this as much as I could by

rejecting the splits between academia and activism, (traditional) theory and praxis or lived experiences, researcher and researched.

Focus group discussion

I used a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). This helped me avoid extracting information (as much as possible) from the co-researchers, instead creating a flowing conversation.

Furthermore, during these discussions, I outlined their shared narrative and differences regarding their experiences and opinions. This contrasts the assumption that all knowledge is shared equally among the group or that there is a common, underlying, homogeneous knowledge among all (co-)researchers (Eeuwijk & Angehrn, 2017, p. 1).

I prepared questions for these sessions to guide the conversation around joyful militancy. FGD uses different procedures, but the main aim is for the persons involved to meet in a safe setting, which, in this case, was at my apartment. I recorded the discussions using my phone, and after completing the thesis, I deleted the recordings. At all times, I discussed to what extent and how I used the recording. During the discussions, no participant had to answer any question they did not want to answer nor talk about anything they did not feel comfortable sharing. I stated this before we started the sessions. I always shared with the participants what I wrote and did not write anything anyone felt uncomfortable with. The participants in my research were anonymized using aliases of their choosing.

The agency and the voices of these (co-)producers of knowledge were central. I sent drafts of the thesis to the participants for feedback, and some provided it. I have been lucky enough to be surrounded by amazing activists these last few years, many of whom I can call good friends. This provided us the trust and community needed when doing the research and during any actions I was part of.

I co-created this research, meaning that my approach to my research question was iterative. I went through a cyclical process of revising theories, interview questions, and sub-questions, producing data, and conversing and revising with the participants. I assumed that a single conversation would not provide enough data to analyze; therefore, I conducted multiple sessions.

Questions of discussion

The questions of discussion can be found in the appendix.

I began each session by informing the participants that participation was voluntary and anonymous and that anyone could stop or skip questions at any time. To help create a more grounded atmosphere, we began with a five-minute meditation followed by a check-in, a common activist practice that assesses our emotional and physical well-being.

After presenting the main topic and overarching research question, I encouraged open conversation to prevent participants from feeling as though they were only responding to a questionnaire, not just with me but among all participants. I ended each time by thanking everyone and checking if anything was left unsaid. After each meeting, I followed up with an anonymous feedback form or asked them directly for their thoughts on the session(s).

Participants

A total of eight participants took part in this research. All were current or former students at Erasmus University Rotterdam, and I had already been in close contact with each participant. The age range was 20-32, and most were from white(-passing) or mixed backgrounds. Our shared familiarity with the university shaped not only what we discussed but also how we discussed it through a lens influenced by academic training, critical discourse, and a degree of comfort in those settings. This gave us certain tools, but it likely also created blind spots as we share similar backgrounds.

Having a rather small group allowed the participants to express themselves openly, as they trusted me and one another. Every participant has been beautifully open and honest, which I deeply appreciated, given the emotional and political nature of the topics. I asked for feedback, and participants took this seriously; they provided excellent feedback regarding both the group discussions and the thesis, which I incorporated throughout.

I want to emphasize that these conversations are not full reflections of a participant's character; they are merely samples. It is essential to realize that these people's identities and frames of reference are ever-changing as they continue to learn. The results from this research showcase examples. Therefore, I do not claim this research represents anything outside itself, a selected group of university students caught in a specific moment in their lives.

Analysis

When I asked participants to describe activism, their answers all pointed to a sense of continually reinventing relationships among themselves, with institutions, and, more broadly, with the world around them. They described it as inherently collective, as Pierre put it: “I think activism is impossible on your own. And finding joy in activism because I can’t do the activism individually. I mean, I can find joy in certain tasks, but that’s only in relation to the things we plan together.” This demonstrates that people view themselves as part of a larger process, a process that is already constantly unfolding, one of struggle and connection. Thus, activism can lay the groundwork for joy to emerge, but more is needed for joy to sprout.

When we think of it in the metaphor of a garden, activism (not only direct actions or protests but also reading, talking, caring, and loving) has the potential to allow joy to bloom. However, more components are needed: the ground must be fertile enough, a seed must be planted, it needs to rain occasionally, and it requires sunlight. I use this metaphor to illustrate how good compositions can allow joy to grow and flourish, as well as the conditions necessary for these compositions to exist.

However, threats are always lurking. The seed may never grow, or the plant may dry out and shrivel if the elements are out of balance. When we constantly reflect and reinvent ourselves while resisting Empire, we can become exhausted and burned out. So, we experience many moments of doubt, fear, and loss. I often heard the question: “*What are we even doing this for?*” I resonate with this deeply, as I have asked it myself many times. I have felt worn out and confused, and it sometimes feels like I am losing hope and want to quit.

Still, it is important to note that for me, loss of hope is mostly an internal discomfort, not a material threat. Some people have friends and family in Gaza or have lived through state violence in ways I and others have not. Their pain is more emotional and material which shapes how they experience activism and joy. For them, saying or doing the ‘right’ thing can be a matter of survival, of protecting themselves or others from very real systemic violence. In that sense, moments like dancing in a circle during an occupation or laughing when things go off-script are far from universally joyful. Our capacity to experience joy in such moments is tied to how we are perceived in public space, how much risk we can take, and whether we will be met with curiosity or criminalization. So, I do not share the same proximity to violence as others, which is crucial to name. I can afford to step back and not fear for my life because of it. I have not seen the terrors that others have, so I may not see or feel the urgency as much. We are all doomed to question constantly whether we are doing enough, and we all

make sacrifices, seeking a balance between our commitment to the cause and the extent to which we are prepared to sacrifice for it. And when we can step back, we must realize that this option is a privilege. Not everyone has it.

Nonetheless, even within these unequal conditions, what helps keep the plant alive is the community of people around us, the connections that are created, and the relationships that are built. When we feel lost or even crazy, we find others who ask the same questions. We process these feelings and experiences together while eating, talking, or blockading a road. In those moments, for example, when some participants were “singing, screaming ‘*Which side are you on?*’ while the cops are coming in,” they feel powerfully alive, not as an individual but as a part of something larger. The plant begins to root and grow into something liberating: realizing we can take up space, whether physically or symbolically, pushing back against everything that tries to block our light and make us small.

The (emotional) garden of activism is wide and messy. Combativeness, anger, love, grief, euphoria, fatigue, and joy are just a few that have been named on the spectrum of feelings associated with activism: often, all at once. There are these intense moments of connection and joy reminding us of why we choose to be here time and again, as it is a constant choice. However, we need good compositions within this garden: rich soil, rain, and sunlight. These are the conditions through which we can begin to answer the question: *How is joyful militancy sustained in activism?*

Tending the ground

For something to grow, a strong foundation is necessary. Rich soil provides plants with the essential nutrients they need to develop strong roots, flourish, and produce fruit. I do not necessarily have green fingers, but I have learned that soil is most favorable for plant growth when it has a strong structure, is not too compacted, and has not become toxic. So, what would this fertile ground look like in the context of activism, and how can this help grow the seed of joy?

Let us start with the soil's structure as a metaphor for composed strength. In ecology, healthy soil holds together while air, water, and roots move through it. In activism, the same is true: a strong structure is not about being airtight but about having common values and practices while still leaving room to breathe and change. There has to be some room for mistakes as they will be made during the process of decolonizing ourselves. Empire has seeped deeply into our beings and will sometimes emerge: it then needs to be uprooted in order for joy to grow without punishing ourselves or others. However, before we can plant the seed of joy, there must be an opening for it to be planted, a willingness to uproot Empire. This willingness is one of the most consistent traits I have observed among activists. Therefore, a large part of being an activist, as described by the participants, is being surrounded by people who "get it." Mulaz described how being with like-minded people creates space to delve deeper and move faster concerning learning processes. Certain knowledge can be taken as a given, allowing us to discuss complex ideas without constantly having to backtrack to justify our positions, strengthening our structure.

However, this comfort then also highlights how different the world outside our "bubble" can feel. Simon discussed how this becomes even more apparent when interacting with colleagues or family, who perceive them as "the woke one" and respond with cynicism or ridicule to the things they say. It can be quite exhausting to feel like you have to "deliver a five-part lecture just to explain why something matters. At some point, you start to wonder: Is it even worth it to explain this?" This moment of disconnection where you realize you connect better with "some complete stranger" than with old friends or relatives can be, as Mulaz said, "quite unsettling." It raises doubts: "Have I changed too much? Am I stuck in a bubble?" However, perhaps the issue is not the bubble. Perhaps the bubble is a form of collective clarity in a world that often refuses to examine itself. Simon put it very clearly:

"Most people aren't resistant because they lack knowledge, but because they're unwilling to question themselves. So it's not even about people needing to have a lot

of knowledge about everything that's fucked up. But if you're just open to thinking critically about yourself and the world around you for a second, then we can have a really nice conversation, but a lot of people don't want that. They hold on too much. And so they immediately feel attacked if something is said that doesn't match what they think about the world. Then it really becomes really difficult to have a nice and open conversation."

So, it is not about being an expert but about being open to discomfort and the possibility of being wrong. Many people hold on too tightly to certainty and are unwilling to accept that what they believed for so long may not be right. When that happens, the soil is too rigid for roots to earth or anything new to grow.

To experience joy, we need to adjust the components until we achieve good harmony continually. This process requires flexibility and looseness, which in turn necessitates not too compacted soil. Without flexibility, things become rigid. Some participants spoke about how joy died out when their activism became rigid and when there was little to no room for mistakes or vulnerability. Pierre described how some of the activist spaces they had been involved in recently were "not that joyful, to be honest." Even while trying to make organizing more effective or strategic, the experience itself became less enjoyable. "It's all very rigid," they noted, "less going with the flow, less joy." The goal was better activism, but the process was harsh, unforgiving, and even isolating.

This often stems from good intentions: a desire to be effective, to hold each other accountable, and to take the stakes seriously. Nevertheless, when every action must be optimized and every word filtered through ideological correctness, the result is exhaustion rather than growth. As most participants put it, there is often a real fear of doing things wrong, of being judged, of being the one who "says the wrong thing."

Simon: "[But] if that is not possible and allowed at all, then you will not feel a sense of connection with each other. And you also kind of keep each other at a distance with that; you keep your hand to your mouth. I think that it can be very suffocating if you are super judgmental towards others. Instead of just being a bit more normal that you just know of each other, if you say something that hurts me, I know that you don't mean it that way and that there are just spaces and a chill way to deal with it. Which means that you don't create the atmosphere in which something cannot be said."

I recognize this in my own experience of fearing saying the wrong thing, of not being perceived as sharp or radical enough. Nevertheless, this is shaped by the relative safety I inhabit: I am just navigating the discomfort of it. That, of course, shapes the ways I experience rigidity in activist spaces. So, we must keep in mind that a balance is needed. This is not because all things should be equally weighted but because sustaining struggle also requires space to breathe. Without moments of levity, the weight of it all can become unbearable for some. This does not in any way mean that the stakes are any less real, but finding this airiness is, for many people, a part of what motivates us to keep going. These moments of levity, connection, and absurdity were termed *silliness* by the participants.

Silliness often appears as a small rupture, such as mixing up chants, voice cracks during a yell, or spontaneous dancing during serious moments. Within all the seriousness, heaviness, and urgency of activism, it often pops up in unexpected, sometimes even absurd ways.

Tlacuache: “It allows you to be playful and be like, yes, this matters, and it’s important, it’s big, but we’re here, and we’re doing something, and we can laugh about it and still have fun with it.”

As Tlacuache acknowledges, silliness releases some of the heaviness that comes with being an activist. It is still there, but it may become less of a heavy burden to bear in the very moment it erupts. When we allow ourselves to laugh when things do not go as planned, we keep it light, and it keeps us motivated rather than tiring us out. When we press the soil down too much and police each other’s silliness, Janniek says,

“then it’s not fun at all. Palestinians don’t get anything out of it if we only get angry at each other. I think that if you also look at Palestinian resistance, you see so much capacity there to create joy even in the most dire situations.”

Of course, there is a right time for everything. Sometimes, moments require us to be calm, quiet, or serious. We cannot always be cheerful or lighthearted. However, balance is needed. Having this flexibility to experience levity can even be a primary driving force; for example, dancing and singing during protests are vital to maintaining high energy, and the Rhythms of Resistance have been named many times for salvaging a protest by playing their drums.

Another factor of silliness is rebelliousness: the feeling of scheming, doing something you are not supposed to, going against authority. Janniek described it as similar to when “in primary school when you’re skipping class with your classmates.” Through not submitting

and refusing to play along, together with their comrades, giggling and feeling the rush of adrenaline raging through their bodies, a feeling of togetherness arose within the participants, realizing they “can actually just do this,” as Simon described. It can be immensely freeing to realize what kind of power we have together.

Moreover, four of the participants (all in different conversations), brought up a university occupation where activists started playing the song *Rasputin* and dancing around in a circle, messing around. Simon had, at the start, some mixed feelings about this, asking themselves:

“Do [other people] see a bunch of crazy people? You know, that idea. But then I also see how significant something like that is, something so small. [...] Where other people might just see a crazy bunch of dancing students, you just see a little bit of revolution happening. That just changes lives drastically. And it’s just so telling that people can’t even understand it. [T]he university board[’s] managerial logic just really couldn’t understand. And that’s so cool that you just literally *transcend* their ideas of what a world can be.”

When we connect in such a moment, we create a prefigurative space of joy and glitch the idea of what a university space ought to look like. Dancing in a circle does not ‘make sense’ to most people functioning within Empire, with most merely seeing something unproductive and unserious happening, and this is *exactly* why it is joyful: we are ‘breaking the script.’ It is a demonstration of joy, produced contextually and relationally in a shared moment of affect.

At the same time, we need to reflect on how our positionality shapes the way we relate to these moments of rupture. Dancing in a circle during an occupation, laughing when things go off-script, or mixing up a chant can feel empowering or even strategic. However, the ability to ‘break the script’ and not fear its consequences is not evenly distributed. For those more racialized or marginalized, deviating from behavior that is expected from them might not read as a cute, joyful rebellion but as a threat. So, while we recognize and cherish these moments, we must also strive to remain aware of who can participate freely in them and who might be holding back due to fear.

Because risks can be reasons to hold back from confrontations, some people resort to exposing the contrast between joyful, peaceful protesters and violent police officers, which has the potential to make an issue more visible. Through this, joy can be a powerful means of disarmament.

Onno: “[It makes] that police reaction [to protesters] all the more bizarre, of course.”

Mulaz: “I still see a lot of power in peacefulness. And if you exaggerate that peacefulness so much that you just start doing cross-type puzzles under a water cannon, or start knitting or something, [...] it just makes the hypocrisy and the bizarreness of it extreme. And that bizarreness is there every day, but you don’t see it happening before your eyes in an almost aesthetic way every day. So when that contrast comes so close together, I think that’s an added value for everyone to see how crazy it actually is.”

In these scenes, the script is flipped on how confrontation is supposed to look. Protesters are often dismissed as unnecessarily angry and a nuisance to the general public and the police, who are seen as protectors maintaining order against that threat. The fact that they are protesting against *something*, often the state or government, is ignored. By being peaceful- and joyful, the absurdity of state violence is exposed, and its hypocrisy is laid bare. Here, joy arises not as a denial of the threat of (police) violence but as a disarming and deliberate rupture in the narrative of activism. This does not weaken struggle, but it allows its roots to grow deeper and further. This is not a claim that peacefulness is more effective, more strategic, or more morally legitimate than other forms of resistance. That is not what I believe. What is framed as ‘peaceful’ is never neutral: it is often defined in opposition to tactics deemed threatening or ‘unruly’ by the state in ways that delegitimize other forms of protest. What I want to highlight is not a hierarchy of tactics but the strategic potential of forms of nonviolence in specific contexts, especially when they challenge narratives surrounding activism. The power lies in the rupture, not in any claim to moral purity. Different situations demand different responses.

Finally, we must be aware that when ‘enjoying ourselves’ becomes the primary aim of an action or protest, what then occurs is what we, under Empire, would term ‘happiness,’ and happiness leads to toxic decompositions rather than good compositions.

Pierre: “Like XR, when their whole thing is my joy is my resistance [and] they take it way too far, it’s just like oh we celebrate, we party, we make it a festival, everything is all laughy and feely goody.”

Liliana: “I was also thinking about those huge budget cuts protests with the ABBA music. That’s not what I mean with bringing music and joy to a protest. I don’t need ABBA music. At least play Bella Ciao or something...”

With performative cheerfulness, enjoyment risks becoming a spectacle, curated for optics, detached from the very real rage and grief that motivate actions rather than an embodied feeling; it becomes compulsory happiness, the act we have to perform to function, used as a numbing anesthetic. In happiness, we are forced to mask our anger, expected to be ‘good’ citizens rather than disruptive ones, while anger is a legitimate and key part of struggle. Anger, too, can be joyful in its clarity and purpose. This means that joy, then, is not something that can be forced. We cannot say, “Let’s enjoy ourselves now,” or force a cheerful meeting when people are grieving or exhausted. In these cases, a kind of cheerfulness emerges from privilege, from not (yet) feeling the urgency or depth of the violence being struggled against. So what feels like joy in those moments is often just a feeling that lacks composition. True joy does not erase anger; it moves with and through it. Because joy is no joy if rage is not present. However, rage without joy is unsustainable. If the conditions are not right, if the soil is either too shallow or too hard, whatever is growing might look healthy, but it will not last.

When it rains

If rich soil makes growth possible, then rain activates it, softening the ground and allowing the components to mix, break down, and nourish life. In this metaphor, the rain represents grief, despair, and all the emotional weather that activism brings upon us. Because joy, as I have tried to show, is not the absence of pain or grief but a composition where they coexist with connection. Without rain, even fertile soil stays dormant, and without grief, anger, or care, joy starts to become performative and detached. And so often, it does rain. Most of us are not in activism because we necessarily want to be. We are here because we feel we must be, as we are discontent with the way things are now.

Pierre: “I’m not doing this for fun. I am, but I’m not doing this just because. Otherwise, I would just go start a coffee place and vibe with that.”

Mulaz: “And so the question is, do you really need to do something about it? Or is it more a matter of wanting to because you find it worse and can’t live with yourself if you don’t do anything?”

Very often, participants have voiced a deep sense of emptiness and disappointment after actions have ended, especially during the more timid actions where, for example, a march stays on the sidewalk rather than on the street, essentially being not radical enough, not in a purity-test sense, but in relation to joy. When participants participated in actions that were overly symbolic, too safe, or disconnected from any real confrontation, they often felt disappointed and resentful. In these cases, the emotional weather became damp and unfulfilling. It made participants feel like what they were doing was almost useless in the grand scheme of things. So many people did not show up. We did not make an impact. Activism can become performative, repetitive, and ineffective. We can become confused by the opacity of decision-making within groups, and we can alienate people who are not in the same place we are in terms of political understanding, education, or radicality. Furthermore, some participants reflected on how certain spaces can become dominated by internal policing, which they referred to as “micro-fascism” or “the deputy in your head.” It is the feeling that we have to constantly prove ourselves, that there is only one right way to be radical. “No fun. Seriousness only. Only rigidity. Only radicalism,” as Pierre summed it up. The result is often alienation, isolation, and burnout. “Even though there is community and

there is joy,” Tlacuache said, “there’s also so much loneliness in activism.” The rain can become too heavy and can drown the seed entirely. If there is too much all at once, without drainage or support, the ground becomes uninhabitable. It is not just the presence of grief but how it is carried, shared, and made into something compostable that makes the difference. And this, in turn, depends on the composition, as grief always needs somewhere to go. In good compositions, we find support and trust to help us share these sorrows.

It is important to note that this rain is not just emotional but often comes as a material loss, too: police repression, burnout, losing one’s job or education, or the grief of seeing actions fail. Most participants reported experiencing a full spectrum of emotions in their activism. It can go, within minutes, from anger and despair to softness and relief, often even happening simultaneously. Onno described how ambivalent they felt after some protests: hopeful about being connected but also tired and disappointed by the turn-out. Activism is constantly on the move (in)between hope and hopelessness, empowerment and fatigue:

Tlacuache: “There’s always this combination of how can I be so hopeful right now even though this is all shit, right?”

Simon noted that, at the beginning of their activism, anger was one of the more dominant emotions, but after some time, they realized the destructive tendency if left untransformed. Moving *through* the anger, they found a path leading to something gentler: love, aliveness, and joy. This does not mean anger is no longer there but that it finds a place within the wider emotional composition. What many participants describe is not a letting go of anger but a shift in how it is carried and composted and becomes part of the cycle of nutrients. Anger shows our passions and what matters to us, what hurts, and, therefore, what must change. Joy allows us to tune in, which in turn allows us to be whole, especially when we find support in each other. Janniek put it clearly: “When I cannot comprehend how so many shitty things are going on, I would turn to these [activist] circles,” and through them, they “would feel like, okay, I can actually do something.” Even though it might be small, it can be a reason to keep going.

Moreover, Tlacuache questioned the western logic that only one emotion can exist at a time: that we either grieve or celebrate, suffer or smile. “That’s just not true.” Joy and pain coexist, especially in struggle. We often face guilt, a more than valid response to injustice, but as soon as we start internalizing the idea that joy is inherently selfish in the face of violence, we dry out the soil that sustains us. As Tlacuache’s friend once said to them: “You

have the opportunity to be happy, and you're not taking it. That makes me mad." So joy, then, is no betrayal of pain but a refusal to let pain be the only thing we feel.

Tlacuache: "I really think that [the belief that only one emotion can be valid or present at a time is] a very western and colonial way of thinking about it because then it means that there's a hierarchy and that there's only space for one. If we look at horizontal communities and horizontal structures, there's space for both. You can feel joy and pain. [It's] so difficult to remind ourselves of that because we're in a world where everything needs to have a priority."

The emotional climate of activism is unpredictable and often overwhelming. However, grief, guilt, and rage are no threats to joy: they are rather part of its ecosystem. Even when rain floods or feels relentless, it is what allows new life to emerge. We do not need to avoid the storm, but we need to stay rooted and let the water in without drowning in it. We have no choice, so we have to make the best of it. To me, the best would entail the connection, the shared sense of purpose, the love and hopefulness of having those around you that, as Onno said, "are working on the same things. So it's always a bit of that kind of between hope and despair, so to speak."

Let the light in

If rain allows the seed to break open, then sunlight is a crucial force that empowers it to grow. Sunlight in this metaphor stands for warmth, care, and quiet, ongoing practices; it is more subtle. However, just like in Nature, receiving sunshine is not a linear process. It does not just come after the rain, but it shines through it, returns after long stretches of grey, and sometimes disappears when we need it most. Nevertheless, it is such a soothing thought: the sun eventually shines again, not by accident, but because we help each other let it in. In activism, sunlight emerges in the form of consistent, intentional relational practices, rituals of care, and routines that bring the sun back into view.

Tlacuache: “Finding rituals. I think that’s a very important thing, rituals that can bring comfort and stability but a lot of joy and love.”

One form of sunlight is the ritual of check-ins and debriefs. Check-ins mean that we go around and everyone says how they are feeling today, to (emotionally) ground ourselves a little and leave space, to be honest, and vulnerable and more self-aware and aware of others in the sense that when we discuss how we are feeling, for example, tired or nervous before a meeting, we know we might be more irritable or have certain expectations going into it. Debriefs are meetings held after an action where we come together to reflect on what we have experienced together and discuss it: reflecting, learning together, sharing emotions, and being vulnerable with each other. As Mulaz said:

“they help you realize why you feel a certain way. That always creates more joy, not less. Even if you just say it out loud, because you often don’t even think about it yourself, but if you’re forced to think about it for a moment, then you realize, why do I feel this way? Oh, I might be dreading that happening or something. And once you’ve said that, of course, you’re less averse to it.”

By becoming aware of this, we can be kinder to one another, which can invite more vulnerability and, thus, a deeper connection among us. However, as Tlacuache suggested, this could go further. Asking not only “How are you?” but also “What made you smile today?” can actively “bring joy in” to focus a bit on the joyful things, not in an attempt to dismiss or ignore the more dreadful feelings we all carry around, but also to keep ourselves motivated, and keeping our combativeness and willingness to fight.

What may block the sunlight is refusing to take care of one another and oneself. Rigid radicalism can become particularly pervasive when activism assumes an all-consuming role in someone's life. Pierre reflected on how, when their entire social life is organized around activism, it becomes their sole outlet for connection and joy. If the space becomes tense, judgmental, or overly serious, "you are kind of stuck in it." There is nowhere else to turn to, and then the very space that was supposed to offer solidarity and shared purpose instead becomes a source of emotional strain. Furthermore, having high expectations of yourself can be a way to block the sunlight.

Liliana: "It's ridiculous, but I feel like I have very high expectations of me and what I should do, and I'm like if I'm not going to do it, no one's going to do it, so I kind of need to do it but then and the other side I also know that that's not true."

This pressure can isolate people and make them feel like they have to carry the weight themselves. This tension between knowing rest is necessary and feeling guilty for taking it is not just a personal or individual matter; it is shaped by the broader systems in which we live. We have internalized the expectation to always keep going because we still live in a capitalist society where rest is treated as a luxury. First of all, we are often required to work and be busy most of the time, for example, to earn a wage or pursue an education. Secondly, because all of our lives and the systems in which we are required to function are built around this type of productivity, it can become hard to add activism on top of that. Onno told us: "I sometimes find it difficult when we say that time is a capitalist construct. While I think, I just worked today, I want to go to bed." Onno often feels that in activist circles, time is discussed as a social construct that is not real or should be approached flexibly. However, for some, it works counterproductively, not because of the idea that, for example, time is money, but because time can also mean relaxation or sleep.

Moreover, while we often strive to resist this capitalist rationale, even in activist spaces, capitalist logic creeps in. Productivity takes priority over connection: meetings stretch on, check-ins are skipped, and joy gets sidelined:

Tlacuache: "We all hate capitalism, but we still have to think in terms of productivity because, you know, time is money. And that's such a flawed, painful logic, yet it's so difficult to escape it when you still need to eat."

Tlacuache: “I think that’s a big problem. It’s the time constraints or this idea that it’s not important, as in we have no time to be joking around, let’s get to it.”

So, joy is often the first thing to go when urgency takes over: it is seen as a luxury rather than a necessity. However, as Tlacuache said, this logic is flawed. As Ella noted, “You become the thing you’re fighting against.” If we allow the same values we critique (efficiency over care, output over connection) to structure our movements, we end up hollowing them out. The work becomes transactional, joyless, and hard to sustain. We start policing ourselves and each other, cutting off laughter or conversations as ‘irrelevant.’ And we need to realize that we do not and cannot always be productive. We also need to rest to recharge and continue; otherwise, the risk of burnout creeps in. Luckily, Liliana tries to remind herself that it is okay to reach out to others and ask for help:

“Last semester, when it was too much, I [...] just reached out to my friends and was like, hey, can you help out maybe? You’re not an activist, but do you maybe want to help out here? [...] And then you see that my non-political friends also care about things, and they actually want to help because they want to help you [and it makes me] really feel supported. I think that was a big, big step, learning to reach out.”

Reaching out to others can make us feel less alone and realize that we cannot do everything by ourselves. We are all interdependent and that we can tap into the network of people around us to become more capable of trusting in our relationships and the world around us.

These networks are fundamental. We must rely on one another for resources, care, energy, and time. This can be done in many ways, such as cooking for each other, arranging meeting locations, and providing medical care, among others.

Mulaz: “What has touched me most in actions and also in preparations are the moments of care surrounding it. There are so many people who may not be willing to be at the frontlines but who still search to find their own way, their own place in it. So also just bringing practical help and food. I think that there are many moments when you are really angry, when you are with people you don’t know but with whom you feel so collective, when they come to you for such a very short moment to give you some kind of attention or something, that always touches me very much.”

Onno described how important it is to have this network, this community, “which gives a lot of energy.” Nevertheless, rigid radicalism can erode a community from within. Janniek

described how internal tensions and splits after an action created awkward, fractured social dynamics: “People who were close suddenly don’t talk anymore. It’s really painful.” Onno added that these fallouts often go deeper than people realize. “It took me a long time to understand how far [a conflict in a group] went... It really impacted the community feeling.” Of course, none of this means that structure, accountability, or critical reflection are unimportant. As Pierre said, “We have to learn how to learn as leftists.” So, being self-critical is essential. However, the way we approach it makes a difference. If growth is only possible through shame and mistakes are punished rather than supported, the light gets blocked, and the plant cannot get the nutrients it needs. And it becomes difficult for joy to take root. So, feedback and reflexivity are critical. We must call each other out where necessary, but this should be accompanied by appreciation as well:

Tlacuache: “[I would like to take more time] to take a second to look at what [we have done] and look how amazing it is. And yes, it probably isn’t enough, and the world isn’t gonna stop being shit, but it doesn’t mean that it’s not an accomplishment.”

So, appreciation circles were also frequently mentioned by the participants. This is a moment to express gratitude, appreciation, and recognition to each person in a group setting. Expressing how much we value each other might be awkward at first, but it is a vital part of collective growth. Just as sunlight enables photosynthesis, appreciation converts shared effort, struggle, and care into affective energy. This energy fuels our motivation by making us feel seen as valued and that our contributions are not going unnoticed. Appreciation also softens the soil for feedback. People are more receptive to criticism when they feel appreciated, as there is more room for honesty, and mistakes do not immediately damage the sense of community. A culture of care thrives because of this emotional sunshine, which does not come at the price of criticism but is an important addition.

Another important routine implemented in activism is the eating of food. Like sunlight allows plants to photosynthesize and produce glucose, food can be a source of care and connection. Across all conversations, food was consistently mentioned by participants as one of the low-effort practices that bring joy. Many people associate food with a sense of ease, bonding over meals before or during an event to alleviate anxiety and stress and help settle into the environment. Often, meetings involve heavy topics or difficult strategic decisions, and by eating or cooking together, we can lighten the mood with some informal chats, jokes, or venting sessions before the meeting begins, or even just spending time

together outside of all the serious matters. Since we have to eat anyway, we might as well eat together and relieve some of the sense that this is *another* thing we have to do after we are done working or studying.

Conclusion

This research started from a place of anger. At the beginning of my research last year, I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders and believed I had to carry it alone. That turned out to be neither helpful nor sustainable, to repeat: “We do not exist in the world alone and cannot make it ‘right’ ourselves.” Gradually, I found those people who shared this anger, this grief about the state of the world, who were also trying to figure out how to stay in the fight without losing themselves. Then, someone said to me: “You focus a lot on anger. But you cannot hate something if you do not also love something.” This stuck with me, and I began to think: it is not just about how or why we resist, but also about how we keep resisting without burning out, without turning on each other, without losing the love that made us care in the first place. This thesis grew out of a desire to explore this further.

To discover which conditions are necessary for good compositions in activism, which in turn allow for joy to exist, I unpacked the conversations with the participants through the metaphor of a garden. In this ecosystem within the garden, the elements present must be in balance; otherwise, the environment is not favorable enough for life to flourish. Often, where joy is absent, one or more of the components are missing.

First of all, the soil needs to be healthy enough with a strong structure; it ought not to be too compacted, and it must not become toxic. Having a strong structure entails a shared understanding of the world and an openness to constantly challenge this, sitting with the discomfort of being wrong. It is essential to note, however, that the participants and I have all acquired at least one university degree, indicating that our social and educational backgrounds influence our frame of reference. Moreover, not-too-compacted soil means that there is room for laughter and silliness. There needs to be room to make mistakes and accountability rather than punishment; yet, we should remind ourselves that for many of us, this manifests more as a dilemma than a material threat. Not everyone can make mistakes without facing detrimental consequences, and those who do not have the luxury of viewing us dance, knit, or sing, for example, as a form of peaceful protest, may feel estranged from us or the movement. Because when dancing and singing become the main event of an action or protest, it may turn into mere happiness. We must acknowledge our anger, allowing it to be felt rather than numbed so that these emotions can coexist in harmony. The soil must not become too shallow or too hard.

Secondly, it will rain often. Rain represents the grief, anger, and despair that we carry with us in activism. Most of us feel we would rather be doing something else, but we could

not live with ourselves if we were. So we must hold on to it and make the best of it. Nevertheless, that is exactly what makes this rain so powerful: it can be a driving force for action. We must be careful not to let it drown us by seeking drainage support and turn it into something compostable. We all experience anger, grief, laughter, rest, confusion, and hope (usually all at once), but the key lies in being able to move through them rather than being stopped by them, as they are needed for the ecosystem to survive. Still, grief may weigh heavier on some than on others.

Finally, sunlight is needed. This is the warmth of care, of routines. They are always there, sometimes more in the background than other times, yet it is a crucial element. Even when it rains, the sun is shining, but we sometimes need to remind ourselves and others to let it break through. We achieve this through care for one another, such as check-ins, debriefs, appreciation circles, or sharing food, as well as by caring for ourselves by learning to ask for help and taking a break. In this, it is essential to consider where we draw our boundaries and how we perceive the balance between urgency and rest. Not everyone can withdraw at all times, so when we do, we must realize the privilege we have in these moments.

All of these elements are crucial and must be in good harmony. If one misses, the others do not work the same, and joy ceases to exist. To allow these conditions to flourish together, we must actively cultivate and tend to our garden because joyful militancy is not just a mood but a set of practices, infrastructures, and affective conditions. Furthermore, it is not just a side effect of activism but the very condition for its sustainability. If we do not put in the work to maintain this, rigid radicalism starts eroding the affective foundation of joyful militancy. By recognizing the more toxic aspects, we can clarify what joyful militancy is up against. Moreover, this thesis has demonstrated that joy can never be an individual phenomenon: joy is emergent because it arises from good compositions between elements, so from the ways we build and participate in something larger than ourselves.

This thesis provides an example of what joyful militancy could look like in praxis. This is not to offer a type of blueprint, however, as that was never the point. I want to offer a starting point from which we can think about this together; many things will remain open and unresolved, as they need to be. This thesis was not just a research project but an effort to be in solidarity with others who are asking similar questions and to engage in conversation with those who have come before me and those I have stood beside in actions. I hope it can help us stay in the fight, not out of guilt or obligation, but because we empower each other and are growing something we can love together. And in order to do so, we must ask ourselves constantly: ‘What here needs to be nurtured, and what needs to be dismantled?’

Therefore, the answer to my research question, ‘*How is joyful militancy sustained in activism?*’ contains many elements. It is sustained through openness, silliness, all of our affects, care, rituals, collective learning, and the refusal to individualize struggle. It is sustained when we are reminded that we are part of something bigger, part of the interrelated web of connections, and when we organize not just for outcomes but also for how we live and feel along the way.

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Appendix

Discussion questions

Introduction

1. How would you like to introduce/describe/identify(pronouns) yourself? What are your interests and passions?
2. What does activism mean to you? How do you relate to activism?/What role does activism play in your life?
3. What kind of activist work are you engaged in (or interested in)?
4. What initially brought you into activism, and what keeps you involved?
5. What emotions do you associate most with activism?
6. What do you like about your activism? And why?
7. What don't you like about your activism? And why?

Joy

8. When you hear the phrase "joy in activism", what comes to mind?
9. Can you recall a moment in your activism that brought you joy? What made it joyful?
10. Have you experienced joy as an important part of activism, or does activism often feel more focused on struggle?
11. How do you think joy interacts with other emotions in activism (anger, frustration, hope, despair, etc)?
12. What are some specific practices or actions within activist spaces that you feel generate a feeling of joy? (humor, music, shared meals, celebrations, creativity, etc)

Sustaining

13. Have you ever felt moments of burnout or exhaustion in activism? How did you navigate that?
14. What are, you feel, the biggest barriers to sustaining joy in activism? (repression, internal conflicts, external pressures, emotional burnout, etc)
15. How does your activist community (or lack thereof) impact your ability to sustain joy?

16. Have you seen joy being used as a tool of resistance? If so, how?
17. Do you feel that joy is actively sustained in the activist spaces you are in? Why or why not?

Collective struggle

18. Have you found that joy in your activism is an individual or a collective experience?
19. Have you been part of activist spaces where joy was prioritized? If so, what did that look like?
20. What role do you feel relationships and friendships play in sustaining activism and joy?
21. How do you think activist communities can better cultivate and protect joy in their work?
22. Have you ever participated in actions or campaigns that incorporated joyful elements (like humor, creative resistance, celebrations)? How did that impact you?

Tensions

23. Have you ever experienced joy and guilt coexisting in activism? (for example feeling like joy is inappropriate during injustice)
24. How do different activist spaces approach joy differently?
25. Have you ever felt pressure to prioritize struggle over joy? Where do you think this pressure comes from? And how did you deal with it?
26. Do you think there are risks to prioritizing joy in activism? If so, what are they?

End

27. If you could imagine the most joyful activist space, what would it look and feel like?
28. What do you personally do to sustain your engagement and joy in activism?
29. What advice would you give to new activists about sustaining joy and avoiding burnout?
30. How do you see the role of joy in long-term movement-building?

Any final thoughts or reflections?