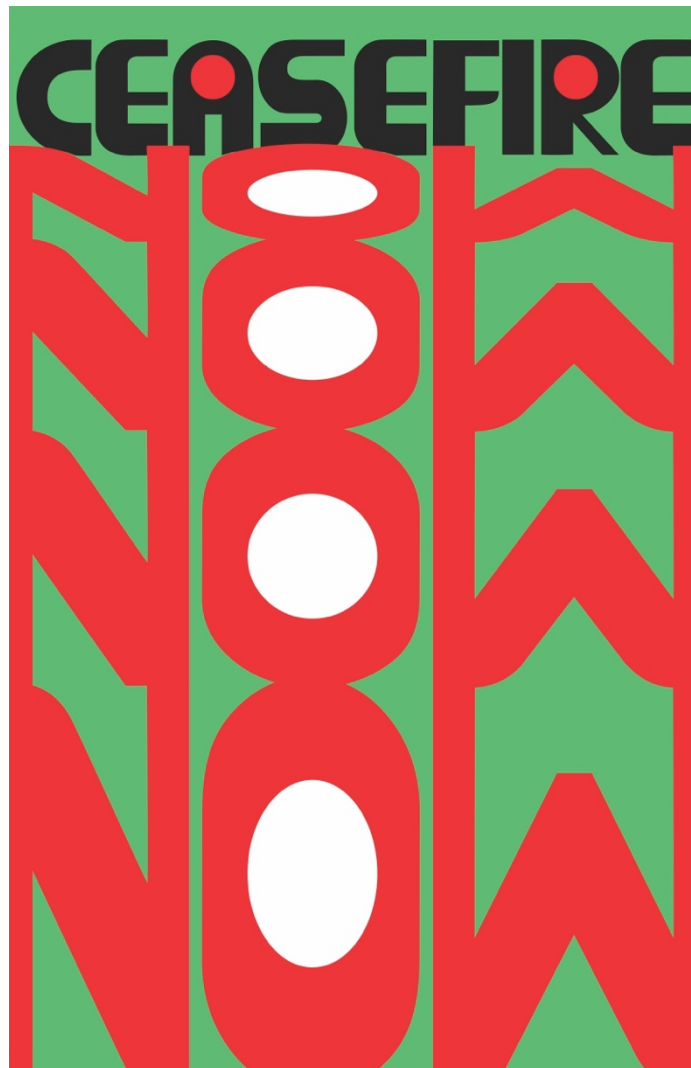


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Taking up Space and Making Demands: Portland State University Students Construct the Free and Autonomous Refaat Alareer Memorial Library

by Aaron Roussell and Anonymous¹



"CEASEFIRE" BY JOSH MACPHEE VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

The local hospital calls, telling you that your child has been injured in a car accident. In shock, your thoughts race: “Is my car ok? Is the chassis damaged or just the paint? Dang, I just changed the oil, too!”

If this litany of thoughts confuses you and your concerns are more for your child than the car, then congratulations and welcome to the moral common sense of persons over property. On the other hand, the administration at Portland State University (PSU) seems more concerned with repairs and costs of [damages to campus property](#) after a string of pro-Palestinian protests and occupations this last year than with the ongoing genocide in Gaza and now the West Bank. Or, more comparably, with the students involved in such protests. The relentless [administrative focus on damages](#) in media reports feels inhuman and dystopian, a focus on masonry superseding a concern for the wellbeing of the student body and bodies overseas.²

The whole ordeal — from protests, die-in, students chaining themselves to buildings, and Board of Trustees meeting disruptions to the violent spectacle of armored soldier-police purging the library — played out as if the University was dealing with an enemy insurgency—both in the sense of militaristic violence and in strategic counterinsurgency efforts. The students of PSU are not the enemy of the institution. In fact, they *are* the institution. The campus itself is a product of student work, tuition, fees, research, publications, creative ideas, and hearts, all fed into the insatiable capitalist academic machine and eventually spit out into the city of Portland. Without students, the University comprises empty buildings. Throughout the ordeal, the administration’s concern with preserving its investments and relationships regardless of PSU’s contributions to the international death machine escalated the protests.

PSU student protests in the spring of 2024 were part of a national—indeed, international—set of demonstrations against the ongoing, genocidal Israeli assault on Gaza. In a galvanization of collective consciousness after October 7, 2023, millions in the US and around the world [protested for a cease fire](#). Already in tatters after years of demonstrations over police killings of Black people, rising inequality, and an openly fascist presidency and coup attempt, the fig leaf of the US free speech regime was threatened anew by massive protests which exposed the [Palestinian Exception](#). Months passed and the Israeli military killed tens of thousands, destroyed archival records, and desecrated homes and graves, with the Palestinian people and culture enduring an unfathomable generational trauma. As US elites—from government officials to corporate officials to academic administrators—cracked down on the protestors across the nation, people shared information, organized as international collectives, boycotted involved conglomerates, and became radicalized by their growing knowledge.

Why is student involvement in anti-genocide protest so important and why did so many university students begin occupying campus buildings? [The US is the largest](#)

[financial and material contributor to Israel’s](#) military forces and manufacturers like Boeing contribute a significant portion of these weapons. Student activists learned that Boeing, among other corporations, was a massive financial partner to universities and municipalities across the US and began asking themselves why weapons manufacturers have such a vested interest in educational institutions. As public investment recedes, private partnerships fill the gap. [This sparked outrage as students](#) felt that their education, ostensibly a public good, was increasingly inseparable from the political interests of financial behemoths like Boeing.³

It is almost funny to realize that these same students sit in classrooms learning to idolize great people who changed the world by fighting oppression. As tensions rose and students began demanding divestment, they were reprimanded and threatened with academic repercussions. Activism was a fine thing in the past, they were told, but now we have established channels for making change—write your congressperson! Contradictions increased, and the angst, mania, sadness, and helplessness students felt demanded form. Students decided to take physical space away from the business-as-usual administrations they now saw clearly as connected with the colonial death machine. For a hot second, they believed that the money and time they had spent on these educational institutions would give them institutional leverage to make change, just as they had learned from history.

Students spoke up. They made demands. Many began to realize the fundamental lie of the liberal free speech regime: that voices alone are impotent when vested and moneyed interests control media narratives and all relevant political outlets are committed to slaughter. What do marches accomplish? Millions participated in the Women’s March and the Black Lives Matter protests, yet *Roe* was overturned and [police funding](#) to execute Black people continues with impunity. Students began finally to understand that these institutions care more about their figurative and literal facades—pleasing their political partners, wealthy donors, and corporate partners; their bleak, blank concrete, and stylized logos—than they do about their student body. As action swept the nation, PSU students watched as their brave peers at more prestigious academic institutions—[Columbia, Yale, NYU](#)—risked their expensive educations to demand divestment through occupation. Boeing is all over PSU’s campus, and the list of Israeli investment [is long, if sometimes complex](#). These campus campaigns ignited a movement. Why wouldn’t PSU students join?

A few dozen Portland State students began camping outside the University library on city land in late April. Protests, rallies, speak-outs, and die-ins grew around the space and official attention was immediate. PSU administrators called on the Portland Police Bureau, a violent organization still under [federal consent decree](#) with a documented inability to follow their own [use of force policies](#), to attack students. Undeterred, protestors moved onto the library steps on University property. A wall of piled supplies and political messaging decorated the front, and several “Free Gaza” writings adorned the upper

windows on the second floor. As city and campus police closed in, hundreds moved inside, barricading the space against violent and reactionary police. The Millar Library became the Refaat Alareer Memorial Library, named for a [beloved and martyred Palestinian professor](#) from Gaza. The library was thoroughly [redecorated and politicized](#) with spray paint, the newsprint of the unheard, inside and out.

After using faculty/staff allies of Palestine [to pretend to negotiate with student protestors](#), PSU President Ann Cudd, [in conversation with the Oregon Governor](#), called forth the violence. Upwards of [30 people were arrested](#), and the charges—regardless of their ultimate adjudication—opened up investigative channels to further administrative sanctions. The personal experiences of the authors and those they are in communication with provide additional details: on May 2nd, the day when police violence peaked, students, community members, staff, and faculty rushed onto campus, despite official warnings to stay away, ultimately forming an enormous crowd to protect the protestors. Arrest vans were blocked, lines were held and broken, and police were delayed and confronted. Police deployed chemical weapons, attacked faculty, sprained ankles, and [broke bones](#). In a particularly harrowing moment, a determined counter protestor [charged defensive lines in a white Camry and then attacked protestors with pepper spray](#).

In an ironic coda, several weeks later (May 23rd), [a number of students chained themselves to the main administration building](#) as part of a larger protest event—textbook nonviolence. Many participants are presently having the proverbial book thrown at them, including exorbitant fines and earned degrees held. Campus police (“Campus Public Safety Officers”) in this moment viciously assaulted protestors, choking, strangling, and sexually assaulting students (grabbing them deliberately by their breasts) who were later charged by administration for their own abuse. Campus police assigned one of the most violent and abusive officers to officially “handle” the resulting formal complaints. In perhaps the ultimate irony, the [chief of campus police suffered a heart attack](#)—multiple independent reports agree that a protestor’s service dog alerted to the impending heart attack, but the owner, a protestor, was dismissed and attacked.

We must pause for a second, because most readers will hear—through media, administration, professional commentators, and other prominent actors, including professors who should know better—only that there is nothing redeeming or important about what happened here, much less that a campus occupation might be occasion for celebration. At its absolute best, such a narrative applauds intentions, while lamenting “destruction,” the inevitable and regrettable excesses of youthful protest, drawing implicitly or explicitly the line between [“good” and “bad,” “peaceful” and “violent” protest and protestors](#), with side-eye directed at so-called [“outside agitators.”](#) Indeed, the PSU Administration is currently leveraging many elements of this narrative to punish students alleged to have participated—charging steep and arbitrary fines for damages (recall the difference between full cost and deductible), requiring

students to engage with nonprofits to learn “acceptable” forms of political expression, and demanding essays parroting liberal talking points on nonviolence. Officials in these hearings uphold climate activist Greta Thunberg as a nonviolent hero, even as students are *de facto* expelled for chaining themselves to buildings. (Climate change, of course, continues apace, and such (neo)liberal praise of Thunberg ignores her assertively pro-Palestine stance.)

Most people have never participated in a liberatory occupation. These occupations are, by nature, constructive and creative enterprises enabled by collaborative and conscious community building and care. PSU students organized food pantries available to all, liaised with media, and designed external-facing defenses to protect students, masking to protect everyone from physical and legal/administrative harm. They took seriously the mental health of the student body (participants, spectators, and the unhoused—categories which overlap), built community through art, poetry, and free expression, practiced and shared spiritual beliefs, and even created a mini-library full of informational ‘zines on practical and theoretical matters. They fought counter-protestors, armed riot soldiers, and self-appointed peace-police. After three days of occupation, police in soldier costumes pried the protestors from the library, with many escaping arrest through adroit tactics and the self-sacrifice of a few. Administrators immediately wrote off the tumultuous weeks as a childish departure from normality, while encouraging students to snitch and turn on one another, leveling punishments more intense than most of the legal sanctions ultimately adjudicated.

Maybe the administration is right. Maybe the students failed. Maybe they destroyed in an unforgivable fashion before they built. Maybe they built nothing of consequence. Maybe they damaged the space without remorse, childishly and gleefully glorying in destruction (they didn’t, of course—books and archives, among other things, were scrupulously protected). But one must consider that, after being exposed daily to the imagery of Palestinian death and destruction and with the searing knowledge that we contribute directly, these students didn’t look away. They watched as those with power did nothing while soberly pretending that pro-genocide and anti-genocide were equivalent and legitimate positions. Administrators mouthed language about “diversity,” “innovation,” “inclusion”, and “freedom” even while the daily evidence of US-supported genocide poured in. The students worked through their trauma, fear, and sadness to preserve the humanity of Palestinians. The word “gaslighting” is overused, but when power points at moral and tactical strength and declares it unintelligible, what other word can be used?

The truth is that the opposition—PSU Administration, Portland Police, and government officials—are attempting to make students feel crazy for responding how they did. They decry students as violent while bloodying them; in such upside-down moral logic, the Powers That Be suggest that locking oneself to a door is violence, while breaking student bones is justice; that words on walls are violent and threatening; that arrest, impoverishment, and exclusion from education is the return of peaceful order.

Words issuing from such authority mean little. All can be translated into whatever will maintain power and control, much like the occupation of Palestine itself. Power, unless forced, has no interest in negotiation, compromise, or sharing.

Indeed, Portland State University “[paused](#)” [only a piece of its relationship to Boeing](#), spending instead a great deal of time on underattended listening sessions and task forces (e.g., “Building Community Through Dialogue”) to [distract and smother](#).⁴ Even this will quickly fade, unless resistance continues. When leadership fails to listen, understand, or act, students will take up humanitarian responsibilities. Without brave, strong, and empathetic students, from the Vietnam War, through South African apartheid, and now the Palestinian genocide, US society would face a grim future, paralyzed by fear and inaction, without a moral rudder.

It is vital we acknowledge and understand that the United States is funding and participating in an active genocide, notwithstanding its pretenses to democracy and justice. None of us have any lawful control over this, no matter what ideals we harbor, unless we interrupt, disrupt, and fight. Students understand this intimately—they have seen opportunity dry up, costs soar, racism persist, bodily autonomy evaporate, a deadly virus ravage the poor, evictions multiply, and now they watch a US-funded and -supplied genocide unfold in real time. Their response? To shake off the mental bonds of a university education—which tells them to vote for professional politicians, call their Congressperson’s temp staffer, write a blog, or start a nonprofit—and instead construct a joyful and creative autonomous community to force boycott, divestment, and sanctions.

Power is interested in profit and its own maintenance. This terrifying march through the unending crises of late capitalism and neo-fascism in which we are unwillingly engaged will continue. The power of protest is not to show ignorant-but-well-intentioned politicians and administrators the error of their ways or to teach them morality. The power of protest is that it reminds us we are free. It reminds us of our collective strength, unburdened by repressive structures. It is a space where we bump up against others, act and react according to our morals and

instincts, and work together towards common goals, unbound by the internal surveillance that strangles our souls during our so-called normal lives. Some of us are unable to remember this, if we ever knew it. But that terrifying march also produces humans endowed with moral clarity, creativity, and bravery who will remind us before the end.

Free, free Palestine.

Notes

1. This piece was co-authored. Due to generalized fears of retaliation, the second author has opted to redact their name.
2. The obsession is also deliberately overblown. [Media reports lead with a \\$1 million price tag \(or even larger\)](#), mentioning only in passing that the insurance deductible is \$100,000—a bill to the University one-tenth the headline figure.
3. A classroom down the hall from the second author’s classroom in the School of Business building literally has “BOEING” inscribed on the glass wall.
4. Such tactics are analogous to the counter-insurgency piece of military operations.

Portions of this essay are adapted from “[An Open Letter to My Academic Colleagues](#)” in the *PSU Vanguard*, 5/20/2024

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