Tamara Fakhoury

Research Statement 2025

What does it mean to *resist* oppression? When is resistance morally appropriate? When is it meaningful? These are the central questions driving my research. More specifically, my work pursues three major branches.

(1) What is Resistance? Beyond the Paradigm of Protest

What does it mean to resist oppression, and how do oppressive conditions shape what resistance can look like? **The first aim of my research is to shed light on forms of resistance that are often overlooked, misunderstood, or undervalued**—such as resistance that is not intended to be a mode of public address (what I call *Quiet Resistance*), resistance that involves violence beyond the standard limits of self-defense (what I call *Violent Resistance*), and morally fraught forms of resistance (*Imperfect Resistance*). I examine how these acts compare to more paradigmatic and well-theorized forms of resistance, such as protest and civil disobedience, and what they reveal not only about the nature of oppression, but also about the values, experiences, and perspectives of those who struggle against it.

Quiet Resistance

I first introduced the concept of *Quiet Resistance* to highlight the ways in which individuals challenge the conditions of their oppression without engaging in public or explicitly communicative acts. In Quiet Resistance, individuals engage in activities that oppressive forces attempt to block or prohibit, motivated primarily by love or deep attachment to the pursuit itself rather than by a desire to send a political message. Thus, *Quiet Resistance* is "quiet" only in the sense that, unlike protest and civil disobedience, it is not intended as a mode of public address and lacks the communicative aims that define those more paradigmatic forms of resistance.

As an example of *Quiet Resistance* that I developed in a recent publication, consider the Wadi Climbing community—a group of rock climbers in the West Bank who persist in traveling to the region's spectacular crags despite the constant obstacles they face. To climb, they must navigate tense military checkpoints, reclaim access to land from which they've been forcibly displaced, and risk violent targeting by soldiers and settlers. When asked why they continue despite the backlash and brutality they inevitably encounter, they do not describe their actions as a form of protest or as making moral or political demands. Nor do they intend for their climbing to send a message of outrage to officials or public audiences. Instead, they speak simply of their love for the sport, the unique experiences it affords them, and the immense value it brings to their lives. I argue that for the Wadi Climbers, climbing constitutes a form of *Quiet Resistance*—one that enables them to forge a renewed relationship with their land amid ongoing attempts to expel them from it and block them from

cultivating its resources, and which allows them to preserve vital sources of joy, identity, and agency under occupation.

Theories of resistance often overlook or disqualify acts like *Quiet Resistance* because they lack the public, communicative dimensions and overt political aims typically associated with protest. In contrast, I argue that such features are neither universal nor necessary for an act to qualify as resistance. While protest is a vital and irreplaceable tool in the fight against oppression, there are genuine and meaningful forms of resistance that do not conform to the standard model of protest. An ethics of resistance is incomplete without acknowledging these less visible forms. Though more subtle and differently structured in their value, they are no less significant as ways in which people push back against the oppressive forces in their lives.

(2) Reasons to Resist: Enriching the Normative Grounds for Resistance

It is common to assume that resistance is always motivated by paradigmatic moral reasons, such as a desire to uphold principles of justice, or fulfill one's obligations to others. However, in reality, a variety of human values can significantly influence whether or not individuals have reasons to resist. Alongside justice, for instance, considerations of love, honor, community, and self-realization can play a crucial role. What reasons do people have for and against resisting their oppression, and how should those reasons shape how we evaluate their actions? **The second aim of my research is to broaden philosophical discussions of the normative reasons that drive acts of resistance and contribute to their ethical value or meaningfulness.** I argue that the reasons for—and against—resisting oppression are more diverse than is typically acknowledged. These motivations can be deeply personal and often extend beyond the paradigmatic moral considerations—such as fulfilling obligations or upholding moral and political principles—that tend to dominate the existing literature.

Violent Resistance

Most illustrative of this second aim is my work on *Violent Resistance*, which focuses in particular on women's violent responses to sexual abuse. Some survivors fight back, at times seriously harming their abusers—not merely as a matter of self-defense, but as a way of reclaiming power or exacting retribution for oppressive treatment. Among the examples of violent resistance I have discussed are two striking incidents: one involving Egyptian feminist writer Mona Eltahawy, who physically assaulted a man by punching him repeatedly in the face after he groped her on a dance floor; the other involving Adrienne Bennett, the first Black woman Master Plumber in North America, who responded to persistent workplace harassment by striking a colleague on the head with a pipe wrench, splitting his hard hat in two. Although violence is risky and always raises moral questions, I argue that it can serve as a valuable response to sexual abuse, insofar as it constitutes a formidable challenge to oppression.

I offer two frameworks for understanding the ethical value of these non-ideal acts of resistance, First, I argue that victims of sexual abuse may resort to violent resistance not only for standard moral reasons, but also to preserve their connections to deeply held ground projects that are

being threatened or undermined by their abusers. Second, I suggest that violent resisters can sometimes exemplify what I call the virtue of *audacious integrity*: a willingness to take moral risks, that is, to act in ways that may provoke serious moral censure–in order to stand up for one's values, and to do so for good reasons. Audacious integrity is a virtue for oppressed people because it allows them to mount formidable challenges to their oppression. While many may be paralyzed by the moral uncertainty that often accompanies resistance, those who embody audacious integrity act decisively, guided by their best judgment about how to confront the injustices they face.

Imperfect Resistance

My work on violent resistance has led me to explore a wider range of resistance practices that depart significantly from familiar moral ideals—such as those most vividly expressed in Dr. King's political thought. My current research focuses on what I call *Imperfect Resistance*: cases in which individuals push back against their oppression through actions that are morally fraught and may arouse blame or serious moral censure. These acts may or may not involve violence, but they nonetheless raise pressing moral concerns. They include actions that would ordinarily be considered morally wrong or suspect—such as stealing as a form of payback for unjust treatment, or systematically deceiving others in order to pursue personal desires that have been obstructed by oppressive conditions. Among the cases of imperfect resistance I examine are *lavender marriages*, where queer individuals conceal their sexual identities by entering into heterosexual partnerships, and an incident from the life of H. Rap Brown (now Jamil Abdullah al-Amin), who stole from the White House after President Johnson dismissed SNCC's concerns about police brutality during Selma.

Crucially, such acts are not always matters of survival, nor are they necessarily the only viable means of resistance. In some cases, morally cleaner alternatives are available, yet individuals still opt for morally compromised forms of resistance—sometimes, as I argue, for good reasons. I show how *Imperfect Resistance* diverges not only from the ideal of nonviolent resistance, as developed by King, but also from two non-ideal forms that have recently gained attention in the philosophical literature: Tommie Shelby's *impure dissent* (2016) and Candice Delmas's *uncivil disobedience* (2018). I further examine what this phenomenon reveals about the role resistance can play in living a good life, the diverse motivations that underlie different resistance practices, and the broader ethical complexities involved in confronting injustice.

(3) Double Binds and Radical Choices: Ethical Conflicts in Resistance

Resistance is inherently risky, and many individuals encounter complex ethical challenges as they push back against the injustices shaping their lives. Sometimes, oppressive systems place people in dilemmas where, whether they resist or not, they remain entangled in aspects of their own oppression. In other cases, resisting injustice requires compromising personal projects or other deeply held values. Faced with these difficult situations, what should someone do?

The third aim of my research is to examine the ethical conflicts that arise in the course of resisting oppression and to explore how individuals might navigate them. I focus on

dilemmatic conditions often produced by oppressive systems—such as double binds, in which every available option implicates one in their own oppression, and radical choice situations, where resistance demands choosing between incommensurable ethical values. I investigate how individuals might respond to these morally fraught conditions, and what such dilemmas reveal about resistance practices more broadly—their challenges, limitations, and ethical significance.

Double Binds

Philosopher Marilyn Frye famously described the double bind as "the most characteristic and ubiquitous feature of the world as experienced by oppressed people" (Frye 1983). Because oppression saturates life with such dilemmas, resisting double binds should be central to the struggle against oppression. Yet the very structure of these binds makes resistance difficult to imagine, let alone achieve. My current research on double binds seeks to clarify what it means to resist them. I argue that these no-win situations rely on stereotypes and other oppressive narratives to constrain a person's choices and impose harm—often by leveraging the power of shame. Drawing on examples from the feminist, civil rights, and Palestinian liberation movements, I suggest that one way to resist double binds is by reinterpreting one's options through values that directly challenge the normative assumptions sustaining them. In doing so, individuals may be able to evade or lessen some of the harms these binds impose-for example, by avoiding the shame often associated with defying dominant norms. This kind of resistance draws its strength from communities rooted in counter-oppressive values—like *genderqueer, nonviolence,* and *sumud*—that empower individuals to see beyond imposed limits and act with transformative clarity.

Radical Choices

A different, though related, dilemma that I examine occurs when the oppressed are forced to choose between incommensurable ethical values—such as between the demands of social justice and personal wellbeing, or between maintaining one's integrity and preserving love for one's family. What I have called *imperfect resistance* can, at times, emerge from these dilemmatic conditions, where every option requires compromising something of deep ethical significance. I refer to these as circumstances of *radical choice*, borrowing a term from Sartre, to capture the depth of the conflict and the gravity of the decisions they entail.

Part of my book project *Reasons to Resist* considers how we ought to evaluate acts of resistance that are not clearly supported by moral reasons. My investigation applies a distinction between ethics and morality found in the philosophical tradition notably represented by Bernard Williams (1985) and Susan Wolf (2015). Ethics is broadly concerned with the question of how to live a good life. Morality is one system of human values among others that bears relevantly on the fundamental ethical question "how should one live?". Thus, morality is one dimension of ethics. It is more specifically concerned with the question of what we owe to others by virtue of the fact that everyone, independently of any special traits or qualities, is equally deserving of respect and wellbeing. Morality focuses on matters of obligation, right and wrong action, and the pursuit of

impartial values like justice, equality, and the common good. Ethics, however, includes a variety of other human values alongside morality, e.g., beauty, love, knowledge, strength, honor, self-realization, creativity (among others). Since doing the right thing and fulfilling our obligations is a part of living a flourishing life, morality is one important dimension of ethics. However, since there is more to living a good life than being morally good, responses to the ethical question of how to live need not appeal exclusively to considerations of morality.

The ethics-morality distinction allows me to consider how resistance may be integral to living an ethically good life and not merely a morally upstanding one. Morality does not alone decide the merits of resistance. Acts of resistance can be evaluated from the point of view of different ethical values, which may at times come into conflict. An act of resistance may be valuable from the point of view of one ethical value (e.g., from the perspective of love or self- realization); while it may appear flawed or imperfect from the point of view of another (e.g. from the perspective of fairness or respect).

In considering how to evaluate acts of resistance that are not clearly supported by moral reasons, one influential approach in philosophy is to adopt a moralistic stance, rooted in longstanding traditions such as Kantianism and Utilitarianism. On this view, impartial moral reasons are treated as overriding: they are presumed to trump other kinds of considerations, such as personal attachments, desires, or non-moral values. From this perspective, acts of resistance that violate impartial moral demands—such as those I call imperfect resistance—are often deemed unjustified, or even irrational.

Alternatively, an anti-moralistic approach challenges the authority of impartial morality in assessing resistance, particularly in the context of oppression. Drawing on a tradition that includes Nietzsche, this stance is radically skeptical of the primacy of moral obligation over other forms of normative value. It emphasizes the ethical significance of personal projects, intimate relationships, and the concrete needs of oppressed individuals—holding these as more normatively salient than abstract, impartial moral demands. From this perspective, acts of resistance that conflict with an individual's well-being or self-interest—especially when they involve profound sacrifice or self-denial—may appear not only unreasonable, but unduly self-abnegating.

My book seeks to articulate a middle ground between the moralistic and anti-moralistic stances described above, both of which risk oversimplifying the phenomenon of imperfect resistance. I argue that resisters need not conceive of their commitments in strictly hierarchical terms. In many cases, there is no single, objective standard by which moral, personal, and relational values can be ranked. Conflicts of radical choice—wherein deeply held but incommensurable values collide—often resist tidy resolution. Moreover, examining how such conflicts arise within systems of oppression reveals an overlooked dimension of systemic injustice: oppression can create and exacerbate conditions in which moral and non-moral values come into deep and painful conflict. For victims facing these dilemmas, the surrounding context of their oppression helps explain why morally fraught actions may emerge as relevant—or even the only viable—forms of resistance.