

# On Language

Iman Issa



Iman Issa, *Comrade (Study for 2018)*, 2018  
painted wood, text panel under glass  
part of the *Lexicon* series (2012-2019)

## Comrade

A 1948 oil painting on cardboard depicts a group of nine figures: two men and seven women standing before seven empty plates and a water ewer all placed on the floor. All of the figures have bare feet and are standing side by side with their hands folded before their bodies, as if posing for a picture. They are varied in dress: some nude while others are fully covered. Only one of them is wearing any jewelry. She is standing in the middle with a golden necklace, earrings, and a ring. The painting is expressionistic in style. It has uniform brushstrokes and a varied palette of red, green, and yellow hues. Its width is 96 cm. Its height is 68 cm.

At the beginning of the quarantine, I was speaking with a friend who was one of the first to point out to me the inadequacy and perversity of the term ‘social distancing’ that was being thrown around everywhere. He insisted that what we were undergoing was physical distancing, nothing anti-social about it. In fact, we have hardly ever been more of a society than now, he claimed.

Watching the news these days over two and half months later, his words ring truer than ever. There appears to be a direct relationship between the socially-rich, physically-isolated space of the quarantine and the recent *Black Lives Matter* demonstrations overtaking the United States and the world. These demonstrations are different from other ones in recent memory. Their participants seem sharper with more resolve, clarity and political acumen. They also have more ambitious demands. Despite the emotional component, these are not simply reactionary crowds but social gatherings of a politicized people with a clear understanding of what needs to be done and what the stakes are. With slogans such as “no justice, no peace” and the concrete demands of dismantling and defunding what are most likely irreparable institutions such as the police, it is clear things are different this time. Perhaps there was something about the world coming to a stop as a result of the quarantine, which allowed its fragility, fallibility and contingency to become clear, while crystallizing the ugliness of its underlying systems and their cruelty.

Over the past eight years I have worked on a project titled *Lexicon*, which tries to offer material and conceptual manifestations to a variety of terms. The terms I picked were ones which felt pertinent, yet for which a clear referent appeared missing. Relying on existing artworks by different artists which had these terms as titles and which had a descriptive relationship to these titles, I attempted my own remakes. The remakes consisted of studies of new forms based on the terms, as well as descriptions of the original artworks I was examining. One of these terms was ‘comrade’, which I felt then and continue to feel now the urgent need to revisit. And so it was with interest that I recently picked up Jodi Dean’s book with the same title.<sup>1</sup>

I remember viewing the cover of her book with a suspicious sense of cynicism. “Only someone who didn’t live under a socialist or communist state, can recall this term with such nonchalance and excitement,” I thought to myself. But perusing Dean’s book, I realize I’m terribly wrong, for Dean is able to posit this term as a remedy to one of the most severe loopholes in today’s emancipatory struggles. Furthermore, she does it with sensitivity and without ignoring the term’s troubled history.

“The term comrade indexes a political relation, a set of expectations for actions toward a common goal” Dean writes. “Comrades have to be able to count on each other, even when we don’t like each other, and even when we disagree... (The term comrade) shifts away from preoccupations with survivors and systems, away from the suppositions of unique particularity and the impossibility of politics, and toward the sameness of those fighting on the same side.”

Dean also sees the term as one way out of positing all struggles in terms of individual identities, as has been increasingly the case in recent time. It offers another rubric by which diverse sectors of society can come together and act towards common goals and a shared vision. ‘Comrade’ to her appeals to a different register of ourselves than identity. She writes: “Attachment to identity is pathological. It’s an attachment to a fantasy of wholeness, or certainty, to the illusion of that pure site that can guarantee that we are right, that we are on the side of the angels.”

The term ‘comrade’ is very different from the term ‘ally,’ which she defines as “privileged people who want to do something about oppression... The term ally appears more to designate a limit, suggesting that you will never be one of us, it doesn’t enable solidarity... Identities appear clear and fixed, unambiguous and unchanging. Individuals are like sovereign states, defending their territory, and only joining together under the most cautious and self-interested terms. Those taken to share an identity are presumed to share a politics as if identity was obvious and politics didn’t need to be built.”

Dean also distinguishes the term ‘comrade’ from other terms such as ‘militant’ which she defines as a term located in the individual subject and her heroic traits but which doesn’t guarantee a relationship to a collective. This is very different from the term ‘comrade,’ which, for Dean, necessarily implies a relationship to and responsibility towards a collective, regardless of any specific individual traits.

Dean is also careful to emphasize that a key aspect of the term ‘comrade’ is its generic quality. It is a term signified by lack and in that way does not and cannot act as a universal coverup for a dominant group under which to subsume others. Although it doesn’t inhabit relations of race, gender and other identities, it doesn’t cancel them out either, but functions alongside (and not instead) of them. Overall, Dean makes a convincing case for why ‘comrade’ enables political relations to emerge, and to her political relations are what can allow the emergence of meaningful struggles and the transformation of a crowd from simply ‘a mob’ into ‘a people’ with demands.<sup>2</sup>

Although it is perhaps too early to judge, watching the now largely peaceful demonstrations in the United States and the rest of the world, I have a feeling for the first time since a long time (recalling the early days of the 2011 uprising in Egypt) the streets are filled with ‘comrades’ in the sense that Dean appeals to. *Black Lives Matter* does not feel like a slogan chanted by ‘victims’ and their ‘allies’ but appears to be one chanted by an all invested, all equally implicated people, all of whom are looking to change the real, structural, and indeed changeable (global) conditions that made such a slogan necessary in the first place.

1. See Jodi Dean, *Comrade*, London. New York: Verso, 2019

2. See Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, London. New York: Verso, 2016, p.8