

It Is The Work

Remarks from Tomo During

UPRISE! 2025 | RESIST | REVOLT | RECLAIM

October 11, 2025

Hello everyone and thank you to my friends at The Leather Solidarity Collective for inviting me to share this space with you today.

I want to start by naming something that matters. I know that I am being given voice within sacred BIPOC space today. That's not something I take lightly. I'm not here to speak for anyone. I'm not here because I have all the answers. I'm no savior and I'm certainly not perfect. I'm here because I've been invited into a conversation that matters – one about the work, about solidarity, accountability, and what it looks like when we actually build community together.

I keep showing up, because I believe Leather is a living practice of leadership, service, and integrity. And leadership - the kind that's real - demands that we look at who's not in the room.

As the Producer and Owner of South Plains Leatherfest, I reached out to the Leather Solidarity Collective years ago and asked if we could work together. It wasn't about filling a checkbox or having a woke "diversity moment." It was about asking ourselves: Who are we missing, why, and how do we change it?

Our events too often reflect only part of the story. Not because there isn't brilliance, power, and leadership among BIPOC and marginalized folks, there always was and is. But because the structures we inherited and created made it easy to stay comfortable, to repeat what we already knew, and not embrace everyone in our community – especially those who do not look like ourselves.

As an event producer, it's easy to think you're inclusive because your intentions are good. But intentions don't build trust. Actions do.

I remember years ago, when I was producing another event, I asked a friend of mine, a Person of Color, to give the keynote speech. I thought I was doing "the right thing." During his talk, he asked everyone to stand, look around the room, and then said, "Why am I the only Black face here?" I was stunned. Mortified. And in that moment, I realized how much I

hadn't seen or understood. I apologized to him and made a commitment to do better. I learned so much that day, about awareness, about humility, and about what real inclusion means. It's not about inviting someone in. It's about being in community **with** them.

And I am still learning. Just last week, I was on the phone with Master Daddy Zulu asking questions I should have known the answers to. Doing this work isn't about being perfect. It is putting aside your own fears and ego. About listening, learning, taking accountability and doing the work - on yourself and in community.

When SPLF and the Leather Solidarity Collective began working together, the shift wasn't performative, it was cultural. LSC's program is a full and vital part of the weekend: a BIPOC-led education track, a hospitality party where people can connect and be seen, a BIPOC-centered dungeon space, and a Sunday panel that brings real conversations about BIPOC experience to the front of the room.

In leather community, we talk a lot about legacy. About tradition. About history. I've come to believe that honoring our legacy means more than remembering who came before, it means expanding the circle to include everyone who's been here all along but wasn't given a microphone. Collaboration between ALL (and I mean ALL) Leatherfolk isn't just productive, it's essential. It's how we make sure the stories don't get erased or only presented in a single narrative.

I've learned so much from the Leather Solidarity Collective, about courage, looking at reality, and the kind of hospitality that doesn't just open a door but truly makes you feel welcome when you come home. I've also learned that solidarity isn't always comfortable work. Sometimes it means admitting you got it wrong. It means realizing that leadership isn't just about being in charge, it's also about being accountable for what happens on your watch.

For those of us who produce events, I want to say this plainly: we have power. We decide who gets invited, who gets paid, who gets platformed. And if we're not using that power to amplify marginalized voices, we're not neutral, we're complicit in their erasure.

That's not easy to sit with. But sitting with discomfort is where the growth starts.

If you're a producer or leader listening today, maybe you've been wanting to make your event more inclusive but don't know where to start, here's what I'll tell you: reach out to marginalized groups to collaborate and start with a conversation. Ask people what need and when they tell you, believe them. Know what your resources are and then offer them, without guardrails. And then, follow through.

Bring them to the table **not** as guests, but as partners. Pay people. Promote people. Trust their vision and be willing to have your own ideas challenged. That's where the magic happens.

And here's the truth: when we make space for others to rise, none of us lose ground. The tent just gets bigger, and the family gets stronger. This work, collaboration, equity, justice - it isn't extra. It **IS** the work. It's what Leather was meant to be.

LSC – I am proud to walk beside you. I'm eager to continue to learn from you. And I'm grateful for the chance to keep doing this work, together.

Thank you.