

Protesting our neighbors

By [Matt Gesicki](#)

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When I started my graduate studies in theology last year, I never anticipated a curriculum with vocabulary like *air rights*, *luxury condominiums*, or *student protest*. But Union Theological Seminary faces an ethical and financial conundrum, one that threatens to fracture our community from within.

In October, Union president Serene Jones [announced a controversial plan](#) to address exigent renovations and repairs to the campus's infrastructure. The work is required under New York City safety regulations; its estimated expenses exceed \$100 million. In what administrators say is the only option to raise the required funds, Union is selling development rights to a contractor to build a tower of high-rise luxury condominiums in the campus's central courtyard.

The aftermath of the announcement was visceral: petitions and [protests by students](#), alumni, and labor organizers; some comparing the plan to the tower of Babel or Tolkien's tower of Sauron.

Today, despite concerns about gentrification in Harlem and the lack of affordable housing in the plan, the project is advancing without major injury. But within these dilapidated walls, divisions deepen and stiffen.

As a student living on campus, I'm split. Between the administration's evasive politics and the student resistance's strident rhetoric, I struggle to negotiate the tension. Union requires all faculty and key administrators to live in campus housing, alongside many of us students. When we protest against administrative action or faculty complicity, we protest against our neighbors. We see them when we get our mail or fold our laundry. The claustrophobia is palpable.

#WhoseUnion was the hashtag adopted by student organizers, in wry reference to the seminary's #MyUnion branding. It's a personal question for me: whose Union indeed? Is this the education in Christian justice and solidarity with the oppressed

that I sought? Is this community of students as supportive and compassionate as they claim to be? Is this institution—perched on perilous moral ground—truly where I belong at this moment?

As is common for graduate students in the humanities, my crisis veers from personal to political to philosophical.

Should we dialogue with power? Perhaps—but dialogue implies equal footing between participants. When the administration’s response to student protest amounts mostly to [a web page justifying the plan as an only option effort](#), such dialogue is difficult to initiate or sustain. The power differential may be too steep.

Should we oppose power altogether? At Union, we study the ethics of revolutionary social movements and their visionaries: Marx, Malcolm X, Dorothy Day, James Baldwin. In “My Dungeon Shook,” Baldwin—a Harlem native—writes to his nephew that

these innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago. (I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming, “No! This is not true! How *bitter* you are!”)

“They do not know Harlem,” Baldwin goes on to say, “and I do.”

As a placeholder for the situation of oppression, *knowing Harlem* is a condition that is beyond the “innocents” Baldwin refers to: the people rendered innocent by an oppressive, deceptive status quo, the people who invest in structures of power and privilege through either ignorant complicity or active participation. We are taught at Union to give preference to “the logic of the oppressed,” a view of reality that is more historically authentic because it is less distorted by the lens of privilege. In protesting the tower, Union students were defying an administration that does not know Harlem as Baldwin and others do.

In this way and others, we’re taught at Union to be suspicious of power. But with such an entrenched mistrust of power, is dialogue even possible? And the counterpoint question: if we are to oppose power altogether, how can I, without knowledge of higher education administration, possibly begin to amplify the voices

from my reading into direct action beyond the perimeters of graduate school hierarchy?

I am tempted to censor myself here for fear of defensive reactions from fellow students. But I'm left paralyzed by doubt and anxiety. I don't think I'm the only Union student who feels this way.

The comparison to the tower of Babel, provoked from students by the fire of righteous anger, is more apt than imagined. In that story of humankind's highest aspiration to civilization, God strikes down the ambition to surpass the heavens. God's tool: the fragmenting effects of many languages. When each builder suddenly speaks their own language, their community no longer communicates. When they no longer communicate, their tower collapses. Their world falls asunder.