WE
are
MANY

REFLECTIONS ON
MOVEMENT STRATEGY
FROM OCCUPATION
TO LIBERATION

EDITED BY
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YOU CANNOT EVICT AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME
WE ARE THE 99%
WE ARE EVERYWHERE

Gan Golan
2011
This book is different. Like the movement from whence it came, it refuses to acquiesce to our traditional notions of analysis and action, shuns the antiquated idea that there is a single right answer to any problem, scoffs in the face of a single set of demands. Our demand? We want everything and nothing. Our perspective? We are all a little bit right, and we are all a little bit wrong. What matters is that we are doing something.

_We Are Many_ started with a simple question: what have we learned over the course of the past year, since Zuccotti Park and the city of New York was “occupied” on September 17, 2011? And subsequently: What do we wish we had known then? What do we know now? What lessons do we want to leave for future social movement actors as this movement shifts and grows? As readers, we longed for a book that would give space to the voices of on-the-ground activists, that would shine a light on the inner workings of Occupy in different cities around the country. As activists, we longed for a resource guide we could use in our organizing work, something to show us that the problems we had in our Assemblies and affinity groups were far from unique, and something to point us towards strategies for overcoming our roadblocks. As historical actors, we wanted to be responsible towards future generations of movements and document our innovations and mistakes, to answer the questions that Janaina Stronzake sets out in her essay on the MST—“Why are we doing this? What do we want in the future? Where do we want to go and how do we want get there? Is there anyone else in history who wanted the same, or something similar? What did they do, and what happened?”—so that next time, and for generations to come, we can build stronger, better, and more agile movements for social change.
In reality, we didn't manage to do any of that. Or rather, what we managed to do is start that process. It will take more work, more analysis, more conversations, and crucially more action to finish the story. In the nine months since we began this project, so many things have changed, grown, developed. Every time we sat down to look at the pieces we'd amassed, we found a new hole, a new element that had presented itself as central to any account of the Occupy movement. After a while, we lost count. We accepted pieces that brought something new to the table (of contents), pieces that seemed to be an invitation to conversation—our primary criteria. We wanted this book to feel like a General Assembly: many voices, multiple perspectives, some in conversation with each other, some at odds with each other, jumbled, exciting, frustrating, at times painful and at times joyful. A reflection of the actual experience of Occupy, written by those who lived it. Productive chaos.

In the process of putting this collection together, we learned a few things as editors. The first is that you don't have to agree with everything in an essay to see the value in it. As editors, we don't all agree politically on every aspect of Occupy, or really on anything else. And that's a good thing. Throughout the process, we challenged each other to think critically about our own strengths and weaknesses as movement actors, and learned to recognize our own blind-spots. That wasn't always an easy thing to do, and it sometimes felt schizophrenic. Just like Occupy itself, which brought together so many different and disparate worldviews from so many different parts of society.

We also learned that social movements have geographical differences. For many east coasters, the issues at stake tended to be largely those of process and structure. For west coasters, especially folks in Oakland, the conversation tended towards actions and tactics. As a close friend from Oakland pointed out to us, what made Occupy different from so many social movements of the past several decades was that it started out with a radical act, it started out by doing something—occupying territory—and, especially in cities like Oakland, it continued to do things and refused to settle solely for marches and statements. Indeed, Occupy managed, for a time at least, to balance both the need for symbolic acts and tangible acts. As we read through the pieces that eventually came together to form this book, we realized these differences of geography are important to underscore—but that process and tactics are equally important as parts of a larger movement analysis.

In terms of what the book covers, and who covers it, we each solicited pieces and encouraged submissions from the parts of the movement and the perspectives that we felt closest to—although we tried desperately to strike a balance and bring as many new voices into the mix as we possibly could. Of the countless activists and organizers I could have reached
out to as co-editors, I chose Mike and Margaret because they both bring a very different set of skills and perspectives to the table—and neither one of them is wholly in line with my own perspective, either. I also chose to ask these two unique humans because they are people I trust—and trust has been in short supply this past year, perhaps wrongly so, and perhaps rightly so, as CrimethInc point out in their discussion of state repression included in this collection. At the end of the day, trust is what carried us through this process, and allowed us to see past the immediate conflict of what and who, and focus on the larger project of creating a lasting, productive movement document, albeit one with the same rough edges as Occupy itself.

For my part, one of the things I like about this book is the way it addresses complex and charged issues. Take race, for example: the race question—is Occupy a white movement?—is one that comes up again and again, in so many different contexts, in this book, and in our everyday discussions about Occupy. We can’t ignore the question of race when we discuss social, political, and economic inequality, but increasingly we are learning, as a movement, that race isn’t entirely black and white. As an Arab-American, I largely don’t figure into most of the discussions that rage in social movement circles around this question—I’m neither white, nor black, nor what we traditionally think of as brown. Equally accepted and equally not accepted by both the white folks and the not-white folks. Hated at various points by everyone, when anti-Arab sentiment in this country has been at its

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peak. It doesn’t bother me—I’m a project-based organizer, and I tend to be resistant to identity politics, mostly because it’s not a framework that I find personally useful for organizing the way I see the world, even though I know that so many of my fellow activists find great solace in it. For me, everything is a mixture—fluid shades of gray, rather than the stark contrast of black and white.

Yet over the course of the past year, I found myself drawn more and more into conversations about the question of color in the movement. And, I found the dominant narrative about Occupy as a “white movement” less and less representative of my own everyday experiences as an organizer. But none of this really dawned on me in a way that I could vocalize (more like a dull confusion or a blind rage, depending on the day) until I read Croatoan’s piece included in this anthology, which was originally published as a much larger pamphlet and circulated in Oakland: in the debates that have raged around race and Occupy, in the portrayal of this movement as a “largely white” movement, the roles and actions of people of color in the movement have largely been erased.

At Occupy Baltimore, I watched the facilitation team transform from a group comprised predominantly of white men (and me) into a group predominantly populated with women and folks of color. When I looked around me at the camp, I saw a mixture of people, from all walks of life: yes, there were young, idealistic white folks and lots of them! But there were aging Black veterans, transgender folks, anarchists, communists, immigrants of all walks of life, the houseless, the unstable, the raver kids, and more and more and more. Occupy Baltimore, like all Occupys, had its problems—it replicated the “isms” of society at large, and three months of working on those issues was never going to be enough to solve the problems of a society gone mad with inequity and imbalance. But, it was a start.

Reality is never a simple thing. It is true, as essays in this book argue, that Occupy will have to overcome its whiteness, will have to own that whiteness and organize in solidarity with communities of color, that we don’t know whether we will ever be able to escape the trap that is “left white colorblindness,” as Lester Spence and Mike McGuire frame it in their excellent essay included here. It is also true, as other essays in this book argue, that, despite the very real shortcomings of the movement unfolding around us, people of color kept on going. We kept meeting, facilitating, thinking, dreaming, and occupying, as individuals, as people of color, as active participants, despite the attempt to erase our presence from the movement, and we learned a lot. We learned so much. This book, and these voices of color writing as participants of Occupy, is, in a tiny way, a testament to that presence within the movement, a reminder that when we define a movement as having a specific identity, we erase the participation of those who identify otherwise.
And, the same narrative exists for so many other “marginal” groups who participated in Occupy. The media would like to tell a story about our movement that casts it as a white middle-class uprising of moderate folks pissed off at the economic crisis and the big banks. And it was that. But it was so much more. Anarchists, those black-clad bogeymen cast as “troublemakers” and “bad elements” by media and moderates alike, paid a heavy social price, finding themselves pariahs of the movement, “convenient strawmen,” as Cindy Milstein writes, while still being expected to contribute organizational skills to keeping the camps running. Apparently, it’s okay to be an anarchist when that involves building a mobile kitchen and feeding hundreds of people on the basis of skills learned through years of Food Not Bombs and mass mobilizations. But it’s not okay to be an anarchist when that involves militant street action. I cannot help but think of one General Assembly early on in Occupy Baltimore’s life when a well-meaning Occupier stood up to very earnestly warn the rest of the group about a threat we needed to be resistant to: the anarchists were out there, and we needed to be sure to not allow our camp to be co-opted by them. Apparently his fears had already been realized—I saw my anarchist friends, cheerful participants from day one, wearing medical badges, working at the kitchen, organizing supplies, and standing next to me on the facilitation team, and as I caught each of their eyes, I knew we were all thinking the same thing: “Too late!”

There are countless stories like these, and one of my regrets is that this book Each of these pieces defies simple categorization—they don’t fit into neat little boxes, and the great thing about Occupy is that it reminded us that we don’t either. Essays about race are also about class; essays about class are also about struggle; essays about struggle are also about solidarity; essays about solidarity are also history lessons; and history lessons are also suggestions of how to move forward.
didn’t manage to collect more of them. In the final analysis, though, *We Are Many* presents only a tiny fraction of the mass movement that is Occupy. This project is a jumping off point to a larger conversation about tactics and strategies, about the past and the future, and about how and why we can work together in the struggles to come.

A note on structure

With over fifty unique contributions to this book, the logical thing to do would be to arrange the pieces into nicely-defined sections oriented around subject categories, issues, chronology, geography, or some other schema. We tried. It didn’t work. The fact of the matter is that each of these pieces defies simple categorization—they don’t fit into neat little boxes, and the great thing about Occupy is that it reminded us that we don’t either. Essays about race are also about class; essays about class are also about struggle; essays about struggle are also about solidarity; essays about solidarity are also history lessons; and history lessons are also suggestions of how to move forward.

Instead, we chose to group these pieces into conversations—sometimes literal ones, sometimes figurative ones—centered around what we call “movement documents.” *We Are Many* is, and was always intended to be, a collection of interventions into movement discourse. We tried, as much as possible, to avoid using pieces that had already appeared elsewhere, because there are so many books already out that are collections of articles that have appeared online, or that collect “primary source” documents from within the movement. We wanted to contribute something different, since those bases are well covered. Yet we found that there were documents—resolutions, analyses, manifestos, essays—that people referenced, or that seemed to us to be magnetic poles around which these conversations revolved. So, we include them here not as section markers, but as punctuation in the paragraph that is this book. They indicate the places where one thought trails off and another begins, and they help the book to loop back on itself thematically and geographically over the course of the narrative. The movement documents appear here with black backgrounds.

We also included what we call “Movement Stories”: short first-person narratives that also do the work of punctuating and anchoring the longer analytical pieces. The movement stories largely came to us through an open submission process announced in February 2012; most of the longer essays were either solicited by one of the editors, or came to us through a series of movement connections. The movement stories appear here with black margins.

Images also punctuate this book. Like so many social movements, Occupy has produced a wealth of graphics, as well as incredible documentary
photographs and films. We tried to include a range of images in this book, some illustrations by folks involved with the Occupy movement, some photographs by on-the-ground participants, and some photos mined from the wealth of content that is the Internet. They provide a beautiful and sometimes haunting accompaniment to the words in this collection.

There are few people in the book that all three of the editors know, and there are many people in the book that none of the editors know. I haven’t asked my co-editors (and I suspect I never will) but I’d doubt that there is a single piece in this book that we all agree with equally. This seems fitting.

There are so many aspects to the Occupy movement that this book does not explore: the role of the media (both mass and social); gender dynamics in Occupy spaces; the usefulness or not of property destruction; the mechanics of foreclosure defense, and the stories of those whose homes have been taken away; the role of Anonymous; militarism; and countless other elements that make Occupy what it is. While we, as editors, take responsibility for perceived slights or misconstruals caused by what we did and did not include, these omissions are not intentional. They are an indicator of the massive spread of what Occupy has taken on during the past year. No one book will be able to tell the definitive story of Occupy, because there is no definitive story, and, one hopes, there never will be. Therein lies our great power. We must use it well.
THIS CONCERNS EVERYONE

My heart makes my head swim.
—Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks

part i: bare life

In the old days, a zombie was a figure whose life and work had been captured by magical means. Old zombies were expected to work around the clock with no relief. The new zombie cannot expect work of any kind—the new zombie just waits around to die.

— Junot Diaz

Reports and rumors filter out of government documents and family distress signals to locate precisely the ongoing devastation of social life in the United States. Unemployment rates linger at perilously high levels, with the effective rate in some cities, such as Detroit, stumbling on with half the population without waged work. Home foreclosures fail to slow down, and sheriffs and debt-recovery paramilitaries scour the landscape for the delinquents. Personal debt has escalated as ordinary people with uneven means of earning their livings turn to banks and to the shady world of personal loan agencies to take them to the other side of starvation. Researchers at the RAND Corporation tell us that, absent of family support, poverty rates among the elderly will be about double what they are now: economist Nancy Folbre’s “invisible heart” is trying its best to hold back the noxious effects of the “invisible hand.”

Swathes of the American landscape are now given over to desolation: abandoned factories make room for chimney swallows and the heroin trade, as old farmhouses become homes for methamphetamine labs and the sorrows of broken, rural dreams. Returning to his native Indiana, Jeffrey St. Clair writes, “My grandfather’s farm is now a shopping mall. The black soil, milled to such fine fertility by the Wisconsin glaciation, is now buried
under a black sea of asphalt. The old Boatenwright pig farm is now a quick lube, specializing in servicing SUVs.” Into this bleak landscape, St. Clair moans, “We are a hollow nation, a poisonous shell of our former selves.”

What growth comes to the economy is premised upon the inventions and discoveries of a fortunate few, those who were either raised with all the advantages of the modern world or who were too gifted to be held back by centuries of hierarchies. Biochemists and computer engineers, as well as musical impresarios and film producers—they devise a product, patent it, and then mass-produce it elsewhere, in Mexico or China, Malaysia or India. These few collect rent off their inventions, and hire lawyers and bankers to protect their patents and grow their money. Around them, in their gated communities, exist a ring of service providers, from those who tend to their lawns to those who teach their children, from those who cook their food to those who protect them.

Those many in the United States who would once have been employed in mass industrial production to actually make the commodities that are invented by the few are now no longer needed. Production has slipped the national leash; it now takes place in pockets of the world that are “export processing” or “free trade,” geographies of wage arbitrage that benefit Finance. The US working class has been rendered disposable—unnecessary to the political economy of accumulation. These many survive in the interstices of the economy, either with part time jobs, or crowded into family shops, either with off-the-books legal activity or off-the-books illegal activity: the struggle for survival is acute. Only 37% of unemployed Americans received jobless benefits, which amounts to $293 per week, and only 40% of very poor families who qualify for public assistance actually are able to claim it. Strikingly, the new recession has hit hard against low-wage service jobs with no benefits, which are mainly held by women. In times of recession, these women, with those jobs, stretched their invisible hearts across their families; now, even this love-fueled glue is no longer available.

The few luxuriate, the many vegetate: this is the social effect of high rates of inequality, the trick of jobless growth.

The political class has no effective answer to this malaise. It has drawn the country in the opposite direction from a solution. Rather than raise the funds to build a foundation for the vast mass, it continues to offer tax cuts to the wealthy: the average tax cut this year to the top 1% of the population was larger than the average income of the bottom 99%. Furthermore, the political class has diverted $7.6 trillion to the military for the wars, the overseas bases, the homeland security ensemble, and for the healthcare of the veterans of these endless wars. There is no attempt to draw down the personal debt that now stands at $2.4 trillion, and none whatsoever to tend
to the $1 trillion in student debt that remains even after a declaration of bankruptcy. Our students are headed into the wilderness, carrying debt that constrains their imagination.

Zombie capitalism has made the heartland of the United States silent, reliant upon goods from elsewhere and credit from elsewhere to buy those goods. This is unsustainable madness. It is unrealistic to live within the confines of Zombie Capitalism. Another system is necessary.

part 2: dates

By 2042, the country is going to become majority minority, or, to put it bluntly, more people who claim their descent from outside Europe would populate the country. This worried Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, who wrote in an influential *Foreign Policy* article in 2004, “The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream US culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril.”

Globalization hollows out the core of the nation’s manufacturing, devastates the social basis of its culture, and threatens the integrity of its people, and yet, it is the Migrant who bears the cross. Illusions about the social glue of Anglo-Protestantism, which whips between the Declaration of Independence and Chattel Slavery, provide the only outlet for Huntington’s frustrations. There is no authentic cultural project to attract the new migrants, to encourage them to find shelter in these Anglo-Protestant values. Huntington knows that these have run their course, or they were never such strong magnets in the first place. Huntington’s fearful panic can only be mollified by the prison-house of border walls, the Minute-men, the Border Patrol agents, SB-170, English-Only ordinances, and so on. Force alone can govern Huntington’s vision. It no longer can breed mass consent.

2042 is far off. Closer still is 2016. It is the date chosen by the International Monetary Fund in its *World Economic Outlook* report from 2011 to signal the shift for the world’s largest economy: from the United States to China. We are within a decade of that monumental turn, with the US having to surrender its dominant place for the first time since the 1920s. The collapse of the US economy is a “sign of autumn,” as the historian Ferdinand Braudel put it; our autumn is China’s springtime. Linked to this 2016 date is yet another: 2034. The US governmental data shows that by
2034 the United States will have a rate of inequality that matches Mexico. The United States today is more unequal than Pakistan and Iran. The rate of inequality has risen steadily since 1967; it is going to become catastrophic by 2034.

By 2042, the country will be majority minority. By 2034, it will be as unequal as Mexico, with the economy shrinking and formal unemployment steadily rising.

By 2042, people of color will inherit a broken country, one that is ready to be turned around for good, not ill.

part 3: conservatism

In Suicide of a Superpower, Pat Buchanan bemoans the decline of the United States and of white, Christian culture. What is left to conserve, asks the old warrior for the Right? Not much. He calls for a decline in the nation’s debt and an end to its imperial postures (including an end to its bases and its wars). These are important gestures. Then he falls to his knees, begging for a return of the United States to Christianity and Whiteness. Buchanan knows this is ridiculous. He makes no attempt to say how this return must take place. His is an exhortation.

But Buchanan is not so far from the general tenor of the entire political class, whether putatively liberal or conservative. It is not capable of dealing with the transformation. It is deluded into the belief that the United States can enjoy another “American Century,” and that if only the Chinese revalue their currency, everything would be back to the Golden Age. It is also deluded into the belief that the toxic rhetoric about “taking back the country” is going to silence the darker bodies, who have tasted freedom since 1965 and want more of it.

The idea of “taking back the country” produces what Aijaz Ahmad calls “cultures of cruelty.” By “cultures of cruelty,” Aijaz means the “wider web of social sanctions in which one kind of violence can be tolerated all the more because many other kinds of violence are tolerated anyway.” Police brutality and domestic violence, ICE raids against undocumented workers and comical mimicry of the foreign accent, aerial bombardment in the borderlands of Afghanistan and sanctified misogyny in our cinema—these forms of routine violence set the stage for the “more generalized ethical numbness toward cruelty.” It is on this prepared terrain of cruelty that the forces of the Far Right, the Tea Party for instance, can make their hallowed appearance—ready to dance on the misfortunes and struggles of the Migrants, the Workers, and the Dispossessed. The pre-existing cultures of cruelty sustain the Far Right, and allow it to appear increasingly normal, taking back the country from you know who.
The Right’s menagerie sniffs at all the opportunities. It is prepared, exerting itself, feeding off a culture that has delivered a disarmed population into its fangs. They are ready for 2034 and 2042, but only in the most harmful way.

**part 4:**

**multiculturalism**

*Obviously multiculturalism is the antithesis of Buchananism. But multiculturalism too is inadequate, if not anachronistic. Convulsed by the fierce struggles from below for recognition and redistribution, the powers that be settled on a far more palatable social theory than full equality: bourgeois multiculturalism. Rather than annul the social basis of discrimination, the powers that be cracked open the doors to privilege, like Noah on the ark, letting specimens of each of the colors enter into the inner sanctum—the rest were to be damned in the flood. Color came into the upper reaches of the Military and the Corporate Boardroom, to the College Campus and to the Supreme Court, and eventually to the Oval Office. Order recognized that old apartheid was anachronistic. It was now going to be necessary to incorporate the most talented amongst the populations of color into the hallways of money and power. Those who would be anointed might then stand in for their fellows, left out in the cold night of despair.*

The same politicians, such as Bill Clinton, who favored multicultural advancement for the few strengthened the social policies to throttle the multitudinous lives of color: the end of welfare,
the increase in police and prisons, and the free pass given to Wall Street shackled large sections of our cities to the chains of starvation, incarceration, and indebtedness. Meanwhile, in ones and twos, people of color attained the mantle of success. Their success was both a false beacon for populations that could not hope for such attainment, and a standing rebuke for not having made it. There is a cruelty in the posture of multiculturalism.

When Barack Obama ascended the podium at Grant Park in Chicago on November 4, 2010 to declare himself the victor in the presidential election, multiculturalism’s promise was fulfilled. For decades, people of color had moved to the highest reaches of corporate and military life, of the State, and of society. The only post unoccupied till November 4 was the presidency. No wonder that even Jesse Jackson, Sr., wept when Obama accepted victory. That night, multiculturalism ended. It has now exhausted itself as a progressive force.

Obama has completed his historical mission, to slay the bugbear of social distinction: in the higher offices, all colors can come. Obama’s minor mission, also completed, was to provide the hard-core racists with a daily dose of acid reflux when he appears on television.

What did not end, of course, was racism. That remains. When the economy tanked in 2007–08, the victims of the harshest asset-stripping were African Americans and Latinos. They lost more than half their assets, which amounts to the loss of a generation’s savings. As of 2009, the typical white household had wealth (assets minus debts) worth $113,149, while Black households only had $5,677 and Hispanic households $6,325. Black and Latino households, in other words, hold only about 5% of the wealth in the hands of white households. Latinos have the highest unemployment rate in the US (11%), the greatest decline in household wealth from 2005 to 2009, the greatest food insecurity with a third of households in this condition, and 6.1 million children in poverty, the largest number for any ethnic group. These are the social consequences of living in a recession, governed by politicians in the pockets of banks. The myth of the post-racial society should be buried under this data.

Even Obama knew that it was silly to speak of post-racism. Before he won the presidential election Obama told journalist Gwen Ifill for her 2009 book, *The Breakthrough*, “Race is a factor in this society. The legacy of Jim Crow and slavery has not gone away. It is not an accident that African Americans experience high crime rates, are poor, and have less wealth. It is a direct result of our racial history. We have never fully come to grips with that history.” The jubilation of Obama’s victory meant that we were in a post-multicultural era. Racism is alive and well.

Multiculturalism is no longer a pertinent ideology against the old granite block.
In 1968, just before he was killed, Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “Only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.”

It is now dark enough.

Out of the social woodwork emerged the many fragments of the American people and the impetus to occupy space that is often no longer public. It began in New York, and then spread outward. The framework of the Occupy Wall Street movement is simple: society has been sundered into two halves, the 1% and the 99%, with the voice of the latter utterly smothered, and the needs of the former tended to by bipartisan courtesy. Why is there no list of concrete demands is equal to the broad strategy of the movement? (1) It has paused to produce concrete demands because it is first to welcome the immense amount of grievances that circle around the American Town Square; and (2) it has refused to allow the political class to engage with it, largely because it does not believe that this political class will be capable of understanding the predicament of the 99%.

From September to November 2011, I travelled to several encampments between Boston and Chicago, talking to the people who had come to sleep in tents or who had come in during the day to participate in solidarity actions and discussions. It was an exhilarating period: conversations that rarely take place were now at the forefront, and a new kind of energy took hold of people who had begun to slump into despondency.

Jeffrey Harris had recently lost his job in Hartford, and then his wife died. Heading home from his wife’s deathbed
in the hospital on a public bus, Jeffrey saw the tent city at the intersection of Broad and Farmington. He got off at the nearest bus stop, walked over and remained at the encampment. The epidemic of joblessness and foreclosures in the city angered and saddened Jeffrey, a pleasant man who wore his life’s tragedies with grace. “It’s crazy,” he said of the inequality in the city. “It’s a bunch of bullshit. These guys, the corporate elite, have to back down and give us something. It’s crazy man. When the system’s not working, then it has to be fixed.”

Jess and Ken sat outside their tent on New Haven Green. Jess lost her family when she was very young, and went from foster home to foster home, faced physical and sexual abuse as a routine part of her life, and learned about power through her fraught exchanges with social workers. “I had to learn how the system works to survive,” she tells me. “If you are poor, you need to educate yourself to have power. You can’t let them take away your free will. No change comes from silence.” Ken lost his job, his apartment, and his girlfriend, got on his bike in New Hampshire and began a journey to Florida. He stopped in New Haven four years ago, and now lives by his wits, with his corncob pipe, his bicycle, and his friends. “When I lost my job, I lost my life,” he told me wistfully.

I met Loren Taylor and Brittney Gault in the Rainbow-Push offices in Chicago. They are with Occupy the Hood-Chicago, where Brittney is lead organizer. She tells me, “The system isn’t going to change. We are preparing for five years from now when the problems will be greater.” Trying to reposition the resources available to the disposable class, Brittany is leading a survey of what people are already doing to survive in dire times and is producing a network to link movements and individuals to each other. One of the lessons of the Occupy dynamic was that although we have a million grievances and are trying out our million experiments for change, our work has been lonely. Occupy tried to invalidate the loneliness of suffering and struggle. A direct line runs from Brittney and Loren to anti-eviction organizers like J. R. Fleming (Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign), to youth organizers like Shamar Hemphill (Inner-City Muslim Action Network), to community organizers like Amisha Patel (Grassroots Collaborative), to healthcare fighters like Matt Ginsberg-Jaeckle (Southside Together Organizing for Power), and to the young people of Fearless Leading by the Youth (FLY). “A movement has been created,” Loren told me. “Anything you think you want to do or what you’ve already been doing: now is the time to step up your game.”

When I asked the rapper Jasiri X about Occupy, he echoed Loren Taylor. “This is the time to get off the couch,” he told me. Occupy is not the encampments alone. It is the new political momentum toward a new horizon. Hip Hop’s ubiquitous presence within Occupy belies the claim that
Occupy was not diverse. It is of course true that some silly people at the heart of OWS made the claim that racism is now over (we are “one race, the human race, formerly divided by race, class,” said the draft declaration). Hena Ashraf, Sonny Singh, Manissa McCleave Mahrawal and others contested this assertion, arguing that the divides have not been superseded. They remain, have to be recognized, and have to be fought. They cannot be wished away. Along the grain of the People of Color Working Group came Hip Hop Occupies, pushed by DJ Kuttin Kandi, Rebel Diaz, Emcee Julie C, and a host of others. “Rise and Decolonize: Let’s get free,” they said. “Our presence at Occupy,” DJ Kuttin Kandi told me, “is to claim our space, to represent our concerns and struggles, and ourselves as people of color.”

When I asked Toni Blackman, a rapper with the Freestyle Union, what she thought of the Occupy dynamic, she said that it brought her “a sense of relief. I exhaled and thought, ‘finally.’ I believe the energy will be contagious. Hip Hop is inching closer and closer to the Occupy movement. Soon singing about your riches and your bitches will be less and less acceptable. The Occupy movement has agitated the stagnant air just enough for artists who felt powerless to being acknowledging their power again.”

Occupy is not a panacea, but an opening. It will help us clear the way to a more mature political landscape. It has begun to breathe in the many currents of dissatisfaction and breathe out a new radical imagination. In Dreams of My Father, Obama relates how he was motivated by the culture of the civil rights

The new radical imagination vitalized by Occupy forces us to break with the liberal desires for reform of a structure that can no longer be plastered over, as termites have already eaten into its foundation.... We require something much deeper, something more radical. The answers to our questions and to the condition of bare life are not to be found in being cautious. We need to cultivate the imagination, for those who lack an imagination cannot know what is lacking.
movement. From it he learnt that “communities had to be created, fought for, tended like gardens.” Social life does not automatically emerge. It has to be worked for. The social condition of “commute-work-commute-sleep” or of utter disposability does not help forge social bonds. Communities, Obama writes, “expanded or contracted with the dreams of men—and in the civil rights movement those dreams had been large.” Out of the many struggles over the past several decades—from anti-prison to anti-sexual violence, from anti-starvation to anti-police brutality—has emerged the Occupy dynamic. It has broken the chain of despondency and allowed us to imagine new communities. It has broken the idea of American exceptionalism and linked US social distress and protest to the pink tide in Latin America, the Arab Spring, and the pre-revolutionary struggles of the indignados of southern Europe.

The new radical imagination vitalized by Occupy forces us to break with the liberal desires for reform of a structure that can no longer be plastered over, as termites have already eaten into its foundation. It forces us to break with multicultural upward mobility that has both succeeded in breaking the glass ceiling, and at the same time demonstrated its inability to operate on behalf of the multitudes. Neither liberal reform nor multiculturalism. We require something much deeper, something more radical. The answers to our questions and to the condition of bare life are not to be found in being cautious. We need to cultivate the imagination, for those who lack an imagination cannot know what is lacking.

part 6. the impatience of the elite

From Oakland to New York City, the police received authorization to use maximum force and eject the manifestations. Harsh techniques of counterinsurgency were softened by the choir of the corporate media, which bemoaned the inconvenience of the encampments. Occupy had to make the police repressions the fundamental issue, given that it is the security state that works hand-in-glove with corporate interests to manage the social costs of making so many millions disposable. It was not a distraction to focus on the police. They are one part of the two-headed monster: Money is one head, and the other is Power. As in an old William Blake etching, the Zombie’s heads, Money and Power, sway side by side, seeking to devour the vast mass. The patience of the elite has been tested, and found wanting. They want their country back.

The counter-attack is not new to American history. In 1786, the farmers of western Massachusetts were angered by the denial of the right to vote in their new republic and by the shoddy treatment of the veterans of the revolutionary wars. One farmer, Daniel Shays, led his band of veterans and
farmers in Springfield, where they marched around with fife and drum to prevent the court from hearing cases against rioting farmers. Shays’ movement then marched toward Boston, where the Senate’s President Sam Adams signed a Riot Act and sent General Benjamin Lincoln to crack some heads. Northampton, where I live, was the home of the trials of the trials of the captured rebels, many of whom were put to death.

From Paris, France, Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison about Shays’ rebellion, “I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, & as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical.” Few listened to these sage words.

Midway between 1786 and now, in May 1932, seventeen thousand veterans came to Washington, DC on a Bonus March. They were fed up. Their friends and relations had been thrown by the wayside, and promises made to them had been betrayed. Across the Potomac River from Washington’s offices, the Bonus Army created an encampment. It would soon be given the name, Hooverville, in honor of President Herbert Hoover, and imitated across the country. Hoover sent General Douglas MacArthur (later of the Asian wars) to quell the peaceful Bonus Army. MacArthur unleashed tanks and tear gas. But the Hoovervilles continued.

The sedimentary nature of Power fears the chaos of protest. What the 1% knows as Stability, the Middle Class knows as Convenience. Protest is unstable and inconvenient. It pushes here and there, seeking ruptures in the fabric of the present. Success is not guaranteed. What is clear, however, is that the time of the present, of the possible has become irrelevant to thousands, if not millions of people. They are seeking the time of the future, of the impossible: Occupy is a stepping-stone to that time of the future. The encampments are no longer, but the spirit lingers, pushing here and there.
Last fall Occupy Wall Street happened outside my window.

At first, I was a typical cynic. "White guys in dreadlocks. Drum circles. Mumia. Cliches. Fuck that." Then, one day after brunch with some equally cynical friends, I saw OWS had taken over Broadway.

"Join us" a beautiful young woman cried, and while I didn't (and probably for the best, as that was the day Officer Tony Bologna maced three girls while they were herded like cattle behind police nets), the next day I brought tarps down to Zuccotti.

Occupy was a participatory uprising. You didn’t have to speak leftist theory. You just had to cook food, or wash dishes, or donate books, or just be there—occupy. Suddenly a mini-city based on mutual aid sprung up in one of NYC’s most unlovely concrete squares. There was a Spanish language newspaper and a tree hung with union helmets, a poetry journal, a medic tent, a place for kids to play. All friendly, all free.

It was an unseasonably warm night. I sat in the park, listening to a kid play viola and another kid recite poetry, reading a book from the People’s Library, eating free ice cream scooped by Jerry himself. It had all the hope, all the loveliness, of a new world.

I started drawing portraits of the protesters, because the media said they were dirty crazies. They weren’t.

Later I did signs for the People’s Library, for general strikes, for unions. I hate consensus. I'd rather stab out my eyes than sit through a General Assembly. But something rare and important and fragile was happening, and I wanted to help however I could. Or capture it at least.

I turned my apartment into a pressroom, inviting journalists from all over the world in to get warm, file reports over my wifi, and drink my scotch.

I was in London when they smashed Zuccotti’s mini-city. The cops threw all the books into garbage trucks, cut up the sturdy military tents. A few dozen brave guys and girls linked arms around the makeshift kitchen.
The cops arrested them and held them in jail for days. The police banned reporters from watching what was going down in Zuccotti, so my friend Laurie Penny, a British journalist, scampered down my rickety fire escape at 3am to get behind police lines. She was nearly arrested.

In an icy rage, I drew a poster of the Wall Street bull eating books. It was a sign on the streets within two hours.

That fall, it was the fall of living urgently, and caring passionately, and talking to everyone. I don't know what will happen with OWS, if it will come back or succumb to infighting. I know, however briefly, we took care of each other. I know we made them afraid.
DECLARATION OF THE OCCUPATION OF NEW YORK CITY

This document was accepted by the NYC General Assembly on September 29, 2011

As we gather together in solidarity to express a feeling of mass injustice, we must not lose sight of what brought us together. We write so that all people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world can know that we are your allies.

As one people, united, we acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members; that our system must protect our rights, and upon corruption of that system, it is up to the individuals to protect their own rights, and those of their neighbors; that a democratic government derives its just power from the people, but corporations do not seek consent to extract wealth from the people and the Earth; and that no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power. We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments. We have peaceably assembled here, as is our right, to let these facts be known.

- They have taken our houses through an illegal foreclosure process, despite not having the original mortgage.
- They have taken bailouts from taxpayers with impunity, and continue to give Executives exorbitant bonuses.
- They have perpetuated inequality and discrimination in the workplace based on age, the color of one’s skin, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation.
- They have poisoned the food supply through negligence, and undermined the farming system through monopolization.
- They have profited off of the torture, confinement, and cruel treatment of countless animals, and actively hide these practices.
- They have continuously sought to strip employees of the right to negotiate for better pay and safer working conditions.
- They have held students hostage with tens of thousands of dollars of debt on education, which is itself a human right.
- They have consistently outsourced labor and used that outsourcing as leverage to cut workers’ healthcare and pay.
- They have influenced the courts to achieve the same rights as people, with none of the culpability or responsibility.
They have spent millions of dollars on legal teams that look for ways to get them out of contracts in regards to health insurance.

They have sold our privacy as a commodity.

They have used the military and police force to prevent freedom of the press.

They have deliberately declined to recall faulty products endangering lives in pursuit of profit.

They determine economic policy, despite the catastrophic failures their policies have produced and continue to produce.

They have donated large sums of money to politicians, who are responsible for regulating them.

They continue to block alternate forms of energy to keep us dependent on oil.

They continue to block generic forms of medicine that could save people’s lives or provide relief in order to protect investments that have already turned a substantial profit.

They have purposely covered up oil spills, accidents, faulty bookkeeping, and inactive ingredients in pursuit of profit.

They purposefully keep people misinformed and fearful through their control of the media.

They have accepted private contracts to murder prisoners even when presented with serious doubts about their guilt.

They have perpetuated colonialism at home and abroad.

They have participated in the torture and murder of innocent civilians overseas.

They continue to create weapons of mass destruction in order to receive government contracts.¹

To the people of the world,

We, the New York City General Assembly occupying Wall Street in Liberty Square, urge you to assert your power.

Exercise your right to peaceably assemble; occupy public space; create a process to address the problems we face, and generate solutions accessible to everyone.

To all communities that take action and form groups in the spirit of direct democracy, we offer support, documentation, and all of the resources at our disposal.

Join us and make your voices heard!

¹ These grievances are not all-inclusive.
It began with a break in process. Georgia Sagri stood up in the middle of the crowd and shouted, “This is not an assembly!” With that statement a breakout group formed the first real NYC General Assembly.

New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts had initially called for the meeting. Earlier in the summer the group organized an occupation called Bloombergville. The three-week encampment was intended as a protest against the city budget cuts. I had participated in Bloombergville out of curiosity but never made a formal commitment. While I supported their declaration I knew the coalition to be run by the institutional left, mainly the ISO (International Socialist Organization), Workers World (a Marxist Leninist group), and Organization for a Free Society (dominated by followers of Parecon).

In late July of 2011, I received their Facebook invitation entitled *The People’s General Assembly*. It was to convene on Tuesday, August 2 at 4:30pm in front of the charging bull. While the idea of an assembly intrigued me I was skeptical of both *Adbusters* and New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts. I wanted nothing to do with the institutional left, and thus I did not attend the meeting.

Later that week I was invited to a dinner party, where I was entertained by the anecdotes of anarchists and autonomous Marxists from the 16 Beaver Group. Everyone was a bit astonished that they were able to break away and reveled in the possibilities ahead. I realized there was an opportunity to have a General Assembly that was horizontally organized. After a bit of coaxing I made a commitment to building the assembly.

My first General Assembly was in front of the Irish Potato Famine Memorial on August 9, 2011. Sixty or so assembled under a great stone arch, which protected us from the oppressive August heat. Amin Hussein
facilitated in an even and deliberate voice, but there was confusion over process. The process group (i.e. the break-out group from the first meeting) gave a reportback. They had decided to use modified consensus, but not everyone was clear about what this meant. We spent an hour or so discussing the consensus process before deciding to use a modified consensus, which would drop to ¾ majority in case of a block. We would use hand signals when needed, progressive stack, and keep notes of meetings. This seemed to appease everyone in the group. We then discussed future meeting times and decided to meet for the foreseeable future at Tompkins Square Park under the Hare Krishna tree every Saturday evening.

On Saturday, August 13, I co-facilitated the first Tompkins Square meeting with David Graeber. I remember both of us being a bit reticent to facilitate, but no one else stepped up to the task. Thus, we began by opening the space for agenda items. This consisted of reportbacks from working groups, announcements, and a discussion around messaging. The Outreach Working Group was eager to begin publicizing for the 17th. We heard from the other various groups. At that time there were the Student contingent, Arts and Culture, Media, Internet, Tactical, and a loosely defined “process group,” which later became the Trainings Group. We then began a discussion of demands. Adbusters had told us we needed demands, and some people actually wanted them. The democratic socialists in attendance were adamant about having clear messaging and one demand, but these arguments fell on deaf ears. The agenda item was tabled.

Every Saturday, with the exception of August 20 (due to Hurricane Irene), we met under the Hare Krishna tree. On September 3, 2011 the NYC General Assembly consented to the following definition:

NYC General Assemblies are an open participatory and horizontally organized process through which we are building the capacity to constitute ourselves in public as autonomous collective forces within and against representative politics, cultural death, and the constant crisis of our times.

We imagined many assemblies in New York City and beyond.

We decided not to have demands, not to have police liaisons, and not to work within a legal framework. The Tactical Group presented several sites of convergence. We would begin at noon in Bowling Green Park, and then move to the next location at 3PM. The action on the 17th would be an assembly. We would not ask permission. It would be an experiment in direct democracy.
When occupiers at Occupy Wall Street refer to “day one” they mean September 17.

It was a strange convergence. About a hundred or so people circled around the bull chanting something about corporate bullshit, the Arts and Culture group held a rally in Bowling Green Park by the American Indian Museum, a performance artist walked down the street in a giant inflatable bubble, and LaRouche members in hooded white robes began singing.

Throughout the afternoon our numbers grew and by 3PM there were close to a thousand people in attendance. We began marching up Broadway to Zuccotti Park chanting, “Whose streets? Our Streets.”

The plans were in flux. We had arrived at our second choice destination and needed to determine next steps. David Graeber, Lisa Fithian, Marina Sitrin, Amin Hussein, Mike Andrews, Matt Presto, and I met in the southwest corner of the park as the Trainings Group. We were worried about the size of the crowd and our makeshift megaphone rig wasn’t working properly. We decided to use the people’s microphone and stepped up to address the crowd. “Mic Check!” We screamed. The crowd responded, “Mic Check!”

The assembly had begun. Everyone sat down and broke out into groups to discuss the world they saw around them and the world they wanted to live in. One by one people shared their stories. Some people had lost their homes. Others were facing mounting credit or student debt. Still others were experiencing police brutality and deportations. Regardless of their backgrounds everyone agreed that Wall Street was the enemy.

We ate together. It was a wonderful meal of peanut butter sandwiches and bananas. Then, at 7PM we convened for a massive assembly. By then the crowd was large enough that one mic check would not suffice. We needed rounds of mic checks, so that everyone could hear. We asked whether or not people wanted to occupy and discussed this for hours before, at around 10PM, reaching consensus to occupy Zuccotti Park. We renamed it Liberty Plaza.

The occupation

Most of us did not come to Liberty Plaza prepared for an occupation. We thought the police would come in early on—maybe even the first night. At most we anticipated staying for three or four nights. Armed only with a three-day supply of peanut butter, cardboard, and markers, we began to occupy.

Suddenly, there was a need to make decisions, lots of them. In the first few weeks of the occupation we held two assemblies a day—one at 1PM and another at 7pm. When we chanted, “All day. All week. Occupy Wall Street,”
we meant it. As the resident facilitator I was called on to help with the assemblies. There were many days in which one assembly bled into the other and I was facilitating for eight hours straight.

At the beginning it was clear that most people had no conception of the consensus process. Thus, on day three of the occupation David Graeber and myself convened the first facilitation working group meeting. There were about a dozen or so in attendance including Andy Smith and “Ketchup,” who would both go on to play major roles in the group. We went thru the hand signals first. This seemed like the best place to start for Consensus 101.

**Twinkles:** Waving your fingers up if you feel good and down if you don’t feel good. This allows the facilitator(s) to get a sense of the group. It is not binding.

**Point of Process:** Making a triangle with both hands to signify a concern about the structure of the conversation.

**Point of Information:** Relevant and factual information regarding the topic at hand.

We explained that we used progressive stack. This meant that everyone wanting to say something was put on a list and encouraged to wait their turn. Traditionally oppressed groups and those who spoke less often were given more weight and bumped up the stack. We then went thru a formal consensus process including questions, concerns, objections, and blocks. We did not use stand-asides early on. Objections were in place of stand-asides.

We had a bullhorn, but whenever we used it the police would give us trouble, so we decided it was better to just use the people’s microphone. Jason Ahmadi had given a training prior to the 17th introducing the practice for use in crowd communication. The people’s microphone had been used for this purpose over the course of decades. It was not until occupy, however, that it became a symbol of free expression.

One night, when Matt Presto and I were co-facilitating, Russell Simmons came to the General Assembly. He wanted to be bumped up on stack to give a speech. I told him, “You can get on stack like everyone else.”

When I am asked about my experience in the occupation this is a defining moment. For me the assembly was about leveling the playing field. It didn’t matter where you came from, how well known you were, or how much money you had. Everyone was equal in the assembly.
By October occupy was a global movement. Hundreds of Occupies around the world were holding their own assemblies and using some form of consensus. However, all was not well in Liberty Plaza.

The General Assembly was becoming a form of entertainment. All sorts of people, who weren’t involved with working groups and weren’t sleeping in the park, started coming to visit. They wanted to see the authentic, original General Assembly in action.

Meanwhile, the original General Assembly, which had been intentionally built, could not withstand the pressures of a constant public and permeable space. Individuals misinterpreted the process to mean that they could say whatever they wanted whenever they wanted. Everyone had a voice to the extent that they didn’t prevent others from speaking, but this was difficult to convey. In a body of strangers there was no respect for one another. It became a body ruled by the mob or “ochlocracy.”

There was also, of course, the money. By October donations were flowing into OWS coffers. The finance committee estimates that there was an average $10,000 a day in cash donations not to mention online donations. We had over half a million in the bank.

The facilitation group was bombarded by proposals. We didn’t ask for them at first, but they were given to us. 2/3 of them were financial proposals. In order to deal with the influx a proposal point committee was established to post proposals on the website and give adequate notice (24 hours in advance).

In short the General Assembly was becoming a bureaucratic, money-allocating machine of the mob. This was completely counter to its original intention.

I began to think about stakeholders. It did not make sense for all those most committed to the movement, who were doing most of the work, to be absent from the decision-making process. It seemed they should be central to it since they were most invested and effected by the outcomes.

Working groups had no need for the assembly anymore. They realized it was far more efficient to work on their own. They wanted to be autonomous and not burdened by the GA. Most working groups were even scheduling regular meetings that conflicted with the General Assemblies.

There was a need for a coordinating and decision-making body for working groups. This would take into account stakeholders and provide accountability and transparency of the work being done. A spokescouncil seemed to be the best model for this particular need.

Enter Brooke Lehman. Before David Graeber left for Austin he introduced me to Brooke Lehman, who had been involved with DAN (Direct Action Network) during the alter-globalization movement. She knew a
great deal about process, but was often textbook in her approach. Instead of posing questions she brought answers. Instead of listening to the group as a whole she developed consensus organically in a small group. In a movement founded on inclusivity and transparency, this approach failed miserably.

Brooke and I had many conversations during this period resulting in an open approach toward consensus building. We ushered in the Structure Working Group and decided to pass a proposal in the General Assembly. Thus, the Great Spokescouncil campaign of 2011 began.

The Structure Working Group recruited others to help draft the spokescouncil proposal. Nicole Carthy, Sully Ross, Stefan Fink, Ethan Buckner, Annie Desmond Miller, and Tim Ambrose Desmond contributed a great deal as did Suresh Naidu and Adash Daniel. We took the first draft of the proposal to GA in mid October, but it was tabled for further discussion. The following concerns were raised: that the council was a representative system, that it would hold too much power especially the power to make financial decisions, that it would silence those who were most disenfranchised in the movement, and that the difference between operations groups and movement groups was not made clear.

At the time my heart sank. The Structure Working Group met to review the feedback, made amendments, and came back to GA only to be tabled again. We went a third time and were tabled. At this point there seemed to be a need for educational public forums, so that everyone would better understand Spokescouncil and connect it to their immediate needs.

Adash, Suresh, and I sat at 60 Wall Street for a solid week all day every day with a sign that said Structure. One by one people came to us, berated us, and then began to understand what we were doing. We explained that spokescouncils came from indigenous traditions, that they were horizontal, accountable, and empowered caucuses. We explained that the inclusivity of working groups and rotation of spokes ensured that it would not become an elite representative body.

On October 28, the Spokescouncil proposal went to the General Assembly. Adash and I presented the proposal. We gave a compelling argument, answered questions, and it passed by modified consensus. Hundreds of people were in attendance and they began singing, “Get up. Get Down. There’s revolution in this town!” This was the high point of Spokescouncil.

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**the dark days**

Two weeks after the Spokescouncil proposal passed we were raided. The NYPD came in with a vengeance—tearing thru tents, beating people with batons, pepperspraying, and clearing every last vestige of the occupation. Hundreds were displaced, scattered throughout the city. Many were housed
in churches, but this was a temporary fix, and we had very little in the way of infrastructure. Spokescouncil became a place to work out conflicts after the raid. While this context is important it does not explain the entirety of why spokes failed miserably.

There were fundamental flaws in the execution of spokes. First, there was the membership question. We outlined categories for membership in the Operations Spokescouncil. A group could be an Operations Group or a Caucus, and we gave definitions for both. All other groups were considered “Movement Groups,” and, not wanting to hold too much power, the Structure Group left the application process up to the Spokescouncil itself. This created confusion and resentment as groups turned on each other and questioned their commitment to OWS.

Second, there was the relationship of Spokes to GA. In our first draft for spokes we outlined that all financial decisions would be made by spokes and not by the GA. This didn’t play well in the GA. People saw it as a power grab. Thus, we watered down the proposal to allow both bodies to make decisions. We thought people would come to spokes because it would be easier than GA and the process would organically unfold. Instead, we created dueling bodies with the same powers.

Third, we did not set Community Agreements or implement an Accountability process early enough in establishing spokes. This should have been first on the agenda. Instead, we became embroiled in a war over membership, which left many casualties.

I attended every meeting of Spokescouncil for the first two months of its short life. I facilitated at least four or five of them. It was an abusive space. Individuals would come with the stated purpose of disrupting meetings and dissolving Spokescouncil. They held the room hostage by couching their criticisms in anti-oppressive language. This was a disservice to the caucuses, which were effectively silenced as a result.

At the same time the General Assembly sank further into chaos. After the eviction assemblies continued to be held in Liberty Plaza, but the space was contested. Often police tried to contain or move the assemblies making it difficult to meet. While the winter was relatively mild for New York, the cold was still a lot to take hours on end. Finally, the GA was moved to 60 Wall on colder nights, but there were private security officers there, which created a new set of tensions. There were so few working group members in attendance that reportbacks were dropped from the agenda. The only people left in the assembly were con artists, informants, and the mentally unstable.

In both Spokescouncil and GA, facilitation teams were verbally and at times physically assaulted. We tried desperately to de-escalate and move forward. Many different individuals and groups tried to reform the structures, but were having little if any success.
**open spaces and ows community dialogues**

The first sign of resistance came from Open Spaces. A break-off group from Facilitation including Leo Eisenstein, Daniel Thorson, Ambrose Desmond, Annie Desmond Miller, and Kelly McGowan began discussing less structured and fluid approaches to group meetings. They recognized a need for this at the end of November. Kelly McGowan created a Facebook event for December 3 entitled *OWS is Moving Forward Together: An Open Space for Conversation.* The description read the following:

> Since OWS lost its encampment, the Occupiers haven’t had a space for deeper discussion and creative reflection together and the 99% haven’t been able to witness the full breadth of the movement. This Saturday, OWS activists will be piloting an Open Space gathering to look at what we value, what we’ve accomplished, and where we are going. This is an open invitation to the 99% to participate. Please invite friends, family or any others who you want in this conversation.

Every other Friday, Open Spaces convened. Kelly, Leo, and others initiated a scheduling grid and people came to post their topics for discussion. Whoever brought the discussion would bottom line, and they would harvest the results thru text or images.

While the GA and Spokes were faltering the Open Spaces meetings were flourishing. In Open Spaces there were no decisions made. Discussions only happened if people wanted them to happen. The container created was flexible.

The downside to open spaces was the lack of continuity. Every meeting was its own space. New topics could arise but they were self-contained. It was difficult to carry a conversation from one meeting to the next. This isn’t to say Open Spaces as a philosophy and/or model isn’t capable of continuity. In these particular Open Spaces this was not the case.

Lisa Fithian came to town at the end of January. I knew Lisa to be a great pinch hitter and this time was no exception. She flew in, executed a series of trainings, and helped initiate the OWS Community Planning Meeting. Lisa, myself, and other facilitators, drafted a call, which included the following language:

> Dear OWS Family,

> This is an invitation to caucuses, working groups, affinity groups, and any other member of the OWS community to be a part of a planning brunch for a larger
community-wide discussion on core issues we are all grappling with. These issues include but are not limited to:

- Accountability
- Transparency
- Structural and interpersonal dynamics of privilege
- Hierarchies within OWS

The meeting was held on Sunday February 5. Brunch was served, people mingled, and slowly we came together for reflection.

Open Spaces wasn’t a decision-making body, and the existing bodies were not functioning. In response to this, many working groups had broken off into affinity groups. Some of these were actually affinity groups in the historical sense and others used the term to veil vanguardist activities including those of political parties, nonprofits, and other interests. In short the movement was becoming less accountable and transparent and collapsing under its own weight. It was time for an intervention.

The planning meeting was part anti-oppression training and part open spaces. We began with a circle. People stepped in if they had power or privilege. This allowed us all to get a sense of who was in the room. From there we identified stakeholders in the various topics, existing projects, and planned to meet again.

There were seven follow-up meetings in what came to be known as the OWS Community Dialogues. Nicole Carty, Tashy Endres, and myself carried them through, stewarding the process. We began with more of a training structure and then broke out into discussions in Spokes, GA, and Open Space format. Our goal in these conversations was to sow the seeds of an intentional horizontal movement. We started first with identifying power, privilege, and access to resources. Then we went on to define resources, which created openings around money in the movement. Hundreds of people participated in these discussions. When asked about resources no one said money. More often than not they said people were our greatest resource.

We rooted the principles of horizontality, inclusion, openness, anti-oppression, and participation in personal experience and grew stronger as a result. Finally, at the end of March we came together for next steps, which included reforming GA and Spokes, a Grievance and Accountability Process, Trainings and Skill Shares, The NYC Movement Assembly (not an assembly but a clearing house model), Project List and Permabank, and the Fun Committee. OWS was starting to feel like a community again.
We Are Many

the coming of spring

The Reforming GA and Spokes next step group came away from the Community Dialogues with a clear sense of purpose. We determined that the General Assembly should be an outward facing, discussion-based body, and that it was ill equipped for decision-making. We determined that a Spokes-council for working groups did not make sense if people were moving away from working groups and into a more inter-disciplinary and project-based practice. We recognized a need to make some collective decisions, but we wanted to be very clear about what these decisions were in order to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy. We were adamant about not making decisions about political statements or declarations (i.e. endorsements). If there were decisions about resource allocation to be made, then we wanted a separate body for this purpose. We also, on the whole, wanted less meetings.

I took on the responsibility of carrying forward the project of reforming GA and Spokes. On March 27, I sent an e-mail to the Facilitation Working Group entitled What’s Next? It included a brief reportback from the Community Dialogues and then the following:

Let’s shake things up!
Come to a GA and Spokes meeting!
Thursday, March 29th
Union Square
@5PM
(meet at the Gandhi statue)
See you there!
In solidarity,
Marisa

Ten days earlier was the six-month anniversary of OWS. An attempted re-occupation of Liberty Plaza had ended in a bloody battle with police. However, a small crew of occupiers made their way to Union Square. They raised an Occupy Wall Street banner in defiance and staged an occupation.

The OWS community had not decided to buy into another occupation. Many, myself included, were against it, but there was potential in Union Square for an open forum. Working groups, affinity groups, and projects were all relocating to Union Square as a soft occupation. Thus, the Facilitation Working Group met at the Gandhi statue.

It was a bit cold to sit outside, so we sought refuge in Barnes & Noble. There, occupying the humor section, we plotted next steps. The existing structures were illegitimate. Reforming GA and Spokes would only reify them.

We needed a revolution.
The difficulty, as in any revolution, was the transition. What would we do with the existing structures? How would we build new ones? When would we destroy and when would we create? We decided to boycott the existing institutions thereby removing our consent while creating new structures. We sought to create flexible containers that would adapt to changing needs.

Jose Martin (also known as Chepe), who contributed to the meeting, drafted a call, which included the following language:

> When we Occupy Wall Street, we build new, temporary structures to fulfill our needs. We construct them as needed, and let them whither away as their purposes end. We don't seek to create new corruptible or abusive institutions that become ritualistic or static, that exist simply for the sake of existing. When there are new needs, there must be new experiments to create space for direct democracy. Where experiments become stale, we prepare to experiment once again.

It is in this spirit that we gathered on April 4, 2012 to assemble anew in Union Square. On the anniversary of the death of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. we came together to dream. We asked, “What world do we live in?” and “What world do we want to see?” It was a beautiful scene, echoing all the visionary potential of the early days of the assembly. We affirmed our roots and looked toward the future.

The structures we created in OWS were far from ideal or permanent. They were susceptible to the same social and political pressures of the society we live in. They replicated patterns of power, privilege, and control over resources. They oppressed us.

In bringing forward new processes and structures I am cautious. I do not pretend to know the answers or impose models, but rather I enter processes humbly in the spirit of questioning. Revolution will never be finished. It is a constant process.
reform vs. revolution

The question of whether movements should fight for reform or revolution is not a new one. It pops up in any time period where people think it’s possible to win one or the other, or both. Thanks to Occupy, the question is on the table again, in this new political climate.

A friend once told me—if you’re struggling to choose between two different options, and you just can’t make up your mind, don’t bother: just have both. I think he might have meant it in terms of something smaller, like which flavor ice cream to order, but I think we can use that thinking about reform and revolution as well—and many revolutionaries of old have come up with similar answers (André Gorz is a good place to start if you are looking for further reading).

It’s a mistake to position revolution and reform against one another. The two do not stand in conflict, and there is no need to choose between them. Reform on its own is not enough, and thinking narrowly about reform can hurt the movement in the long-run, so we need revolution, but you can’t have a revolution without winning reforms along the way. You need both. In fact, the question itself is too narrow. It’s not about reforms or revolution as two abstract options, it’s about winning, and the question is not whether we should win things, but what things we should try to win, and how.

we need transformation

When the Argentines began occupying and reclaiming their factories in the wake of the economic crisis of 2001, they had a slogan in response to those who told them they should take their concerns to the ballot: our dreams, they said, do not fit in your ballot boxes. Though the slogans have been different, it is clear the Occupy Movement has been driven by this
same impulse. The direct action we have taken, the occupations we carried out, the things we said and wrote and painted revealed a deep understanding that there is something fundamentally wrong with society as it is, and an unrelenting belief that another world is possible.

We can make important improvements within the system, but ultimately we can’t solve our crises by making cosmetic changes or tweaking things here and there. We are dealing with a system of oppression in which capitalism, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and white supremacy produce and reproduce one another in all aspects of social life—in ways as subtle as the ads we see in public bathrooms or the lessons we are taught in school, and as overt as the foreclosure crisis and indefinite detention at Guantanamo Bay. It is a system that rests on exploitation, domination, and coercion in fundamental ways, in which oppression and injustice are not anomalies, but in the very DNA of the institutions that dominate our lives.

Austerity—the gutting of vital social services so that the wealthy can get tax cuts while profiting from privatization—is a natural extension of neoliberalism, which is a natural evolution of capitalism. Mass incarceration and stop-and-frisk are policies that grow from a system that is white supremacist at its roots, one built on the backs of enslaved people and in the wake of genocide. Sexual assault against women is part of the normalized culture of our society, and LGBTQ youth face homelessness in astronomical proportions because the system we face is patriarchal in its core. We experience hierarchy everywhere from the school to the workplace to the prison to the home because authoritarianism is part of the fabric of this society, and it is taught to us everywhere we go. War abroad, the hoarding of natural resources by the Global North at the expense of the Global South, massive climate change that threatens the whole planet, and the commodification of everything from humans to air are outgrowths of this system as well.

The things we deal with in our day-to-day lives are outgrowths of these systemic realities. An economy with greater regulations, publicly-funded elections, decent healthcare, quality public education—these are immensely important wins to fight for, necessary on the road to something better, but winning these things alone doesn’t unravel those greater systems of oppression. And even though we zoom out to understand different forms of oppression more clearly, we can’t deal with those things apart from the whole—capitalism doesn’t limit itself to the stock market, it is in the foundations of governments, it is burrowed deeply in our culture, it follows us into our bedrooms. The same is true for white supremacy, for patriarchy, for authoritarianism: these systems are intimately intertwined with one another to form a system of oppression that is deeply embedded in all areas of social life.

Only a real social transformation—one that understands our oppression as linked and at the very roots of the institutions that serve as the
frameworks of our social life—can change that, and we shouldn’t settle for anything less. If we fight for reforms without a deep commitment to building a movement that can strike at the roots of oppression and win real liberation, we risk putting ourselves in the position to trade in long-term power for short-term wins. We must constantly remember that, even when we fight for the things we need in the here and now, it is always on the road to something much bigger. We will always demand more, because we demand it all.

We want a political and economic system that we all actually control together, one that is equitable and humane, one that allows people to manage their own lives but encourages them to act in solidarity with one another, one that is participatory and democratic to its core. We want a world where people have the right to their own identities, communities, and cultures, and control over the institutions needed to live them out. We want a world with institutions that take care of us, our partners, our youth, our elderly, and our families in ways that are nurturing, liberating, healthy, and actively consensual. We want a world in which community is not a hamper on individual freedom, but rather an expression of its fullest potential.

We need a real social transformation—a revolution of values and the institutions we use to live them out.

*Those notions are based on immature premises, proven wrong time and time again, that the worse things get, the more likely we are to rise up—that reform, because it makes peoples’ lives better, is counter-revolutionary.*

**Rome was not sacked in a day**

They say Rome wasn’t built in a day. Well, it wasn’t sacked in a day either.
In school, history is taught around dates and figures. We learn that revolutions are led by gallant individuals, and fought on certain days. We see images of revolutionary flags billowing on liberated mountaintops, of magnificent leaders applauded by masses of people, of moments of struggle when old orders collapse and new ones take their place.

But we rarely read about the decades of hard organizing that led up to those moments, the fight for small gains all along the way, the many working people of all colors and genders and sexual orientations who fought for survival day in and day out making the movement a reality, the countless smaller uprisings that won smaller victories, the many that were crushed along the way. And we learn very little, too, about the struggle that takes place after momentary victories—the incredible work of transforming ourselves and those around us, of building institutions that facilitate a free society, of fighting again and again to keep what we’ve won, of the beautiful struggle of resisting, reclaiming, and reconstructing over and over again.

We have to come to terms with that history, although it might not be as appealing. We’ve got to outgrow the idea that the revolution is an event to be measured in moments and actions, and that it’s just around the corner—that all we need are oppressive conditions and a match to light the flame. Those notions are based on immature premises, proven wrong time and time again, that the worse things get, the more likely we are to rise up—that reform, because it makes peoples’ lives better, is counter-revolutionary. We have to confront that thinking, because it’s popular, it’s sexy, it comes up over and over throughout history, and because it is cruel, empirically false, and incredibly divisive to the movement.

On a very basic level, that kind of thinking is heartless. A theory that compels us to oppose measures that would materially improve people’s lives in the service of some abstract goal cannot possibly be driven by the compassion, love, and idealism that must be at the center of any worthwhile revolution. The consequences of theories like this are disproportionately felt by those already most oppressed and most marginalized, and often proposed and defended by those with great privilege.

But even more to the point, it’s empirically untrue. The theory itself—that deep crisis on its own leads to revolution if it is met with a spark—is bankrupt. If all it took was conditions being terrible and a vanguard marching in the streets to wake everyone up, we wouldn’t need to be having this conversation. It’s already bad enough—just how awful does it have to get? The truth is it’s harder to fight back under worse conditions, not easier. The many working people all across this country struggling around the clock to support their families, straddled with debt, or facing foreclosure can attest to how hard it is to scrape together the time to be
a revolutionary while constantly facing crisis. So can political organizers living in police states like Egypt, or under military occupations like Afghanistan, or close to starvation in places like Haiti where people eat cakes made of mud to survive. Desperation doesn’t mean it is any easier to be a revolutionary; it just means more suffering.

There is no magical tipping point, no low point so low that it automatically compels us to fight, no spark so compelling that it spontaneously wakes us all up. We fight because of our concrete experiences of oppression as well as the little bittersweet tastes of freedom we have pieced together, because of our education and the culture around us or the unexplained ways in which we have learned to reject them, because of hard organizing people have done for decades to prepare us, because of a whole host of other factors we don’t even understand. In many cases, actually, we rise up not when we are absolutely desperate, but when we have won a little bit—enough to realize our collective strength.

Revolution is not an event, but a process. There is nothing inevitable about it, and our freedom is not historically determined. To win it, we have to build movements able to fight for it, movements that struggle over long periods of time to knock down the institutions of the status quo and replace them with the institutions of a free society. That means growing, practicing, learning, teaching, and winning things that put the movement in an increasingly better position to win more; it means fighting back to protect ourselves while pushing forward to create new possibilities.

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fighting back and pushing forward

It’s not about reform or revolution, it’s about winning things that meet our needs now while improving our position to struggle in the long-run, and it’s about fighting in ways that grow and deepen the movement as we go. We need to choose struggles that allow us to fight back and push forward at the same time, to defend ourselves and win things we truly need while building power for the struggle beyond.

An example of a strategic battle like this might be fighting against tuition increases at public universities, and for free higher education. Fighting for free universities gives us the opportunity to draw connections between injustices faced in our daily lives—such as tuition increases, mass student debt, the policing of college campuses, the de-education of people of color, the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the already wealthy in the form of tax breaks and privatization—to the deep-seated systems of oppression that cause them. But just as importantly, winning a struggle for free higher education grows the movement, because it means students don’t have to work two jobs just to stay in school; it means they would have the time and energy to breathe, to organize, to fight back, to push further—to join the movement.

Beyond this, we need to look not only at what we ought to be struggling for, but how we ought to struggle. We should use methods that are practical and related directly to the things we are trying to win, with a wide range of options on the table. But we need to always remember to choose tactics that achieve the long-term goal of growing and deepening the movement and put us in a better position to fight for liberation—tactics that open up space for the movement to grow, that deepen our resolve and understanding of the system and its alternatives, that teach new skills so people can self-manage and struggle further, that allow us to practice our visions of freedom and make it feel good to be in the movement. Sometimes it means being in the streets, sometimes it means walkouts and strikes or other forms of civil disobedience, and sometimes it means flyering and one-on-ones, teach-ins and mass meetings, or a whole host of other tactics. Every context has its own solutions, and we have to be flexible, but we need to remember our principles and our goals—to win now while creating more opportunities for winning beyond the immediate struggles, to fight back while pushing forward.

Ultimately, the key is power—recognizing and contesting it in our enemies, building it for ourselves, taking it from those who oppress and exploit, using it to transform ourselves and the values and institutions of our
society. Winning matters. We are in a battle over the massive human potential wasted, squandered, and buried under systems of oppression, capable of so much. We are in a battle over our futures, the futures of our families and communities. We are in a battle for our lives.

We have to recognize that the institutions of the status quo and the individuals who control them have real power over us—power that can’t simply be willed away, that has to be challenged and overcome, taken and used in the service of freedom. We must take our opponents seriously and confront them, by standing in the face of power to challenge and replace it. We have to fight to win things in the present, not only because we want our communities to survive and flourish, but because that’s how we build another kind of power: people power. Winning things in the here and now is how we open up space for further struggle, grow the movement, begin to develop institutions of a free society, and chip away at the status quo. We fight back while pushing forward, struggle today to win the things that put us in the position to win even more tomorrow. We do this by struggling around the daily injustices people suffer while always remembering our visions of freedom beyond.

And as we fight, we must never give up the power we are building for the comfort we might gain through battles along the way. We must assert that we will never be satisfied by anything this system can give us, that there is always another victory to be won, that our struggle over concrete and present things is always on the road to something greater. We must remember that reform plus reform plus reform does not equal revolution, that real transformation necessitates moments of confrontation, that we must build power to stand up and sit down at those key times and places when crumbling systems are dealt their death blows and doors to new possibilities of freedom are forced open.

It is there—in those difficult battles over the reality of our lives, those long and visionary struggles for freedom beyond what is possible now, those incredible confrontations that clear the rubble away for the new world we are creating—that protest becomes resistance, practice becomes creation, and rebellion becomes revolution. And we are already winning. We have pried open a little space to breathe, to fight, and to imagine a world being born. Yes, it has already begun. Every day, little by little, we are remembering how to dream again.