

**Sowing Her Seeds: Imagining Transnational Social Movements  
in the Face of Global Capitalism**

By

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
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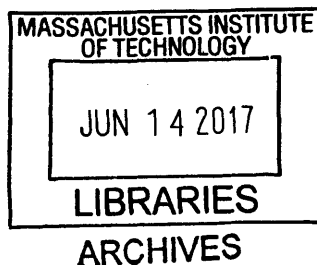
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**ABSTRACT**

The process of neoliberal globalization has long been touted for its success in increasing connectivity the world over. However, a closer look reveals that while capital has rendered many borders invisible and gained a new flexibility, those most devastated by the unending need for profit remain largely boxed in. Political organizing is often constrained by a sectoral focus and an emphasis on hyper-local conditions. As the roots of multiple oppressions become increasingly entangled, we must also break our resistance free from boundaries and globalize our social movements.

In this project I depart from traditional social science methodology and use fictional storytelling to consider community impacts of neoliberal globalization. Synthetic case studies of three women of color protagonists from around the world urge readers to grapple with experiences of colonialism, race, gender, caste, class and sexuality, among others. The characters lives push readers to recognize the limitations to our current methods of political organizing and activism, and to imagining alternative possibilities and paths to liberation.

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*Secondary Reader-* Professor Helen Lee, MIT Creative Media Studies



**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**Introduction**.....9

**Part I: Stories**

    Jaylyn.....26

    Camila.....44

    Devika.....58

    The Movement Council.....72

**Part II: Workshops:**

    Discussion Questions .....78

    Workshop 1: Contested Spaces.....79

    Workshop 2: Breaking Boundaries.....81

**Works Cited**..... 84



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*“Telling my story another way lets me forgive you. Twisting your story to the scariest extent allows me the liberty of trying to trust you. I work to not only get back at you, I actually fight to get back to myself. I do not write into patriarchy. My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger’s lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun.”*

*- Meena Kandaswamy*

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## PREFACE

I chose to tell *this story* because I think we need a new way to tackle the beast. After some years spent organizing, I have come to realize that the Left is, overwhelmingly though not entirely, still fighting small and waging battles instead of building movements. What's clear to me, and obviously to many, is that we are deluding ourselves if we think that this is truly a way to win a more just world for us all. I took a step back from the work with three main concerns about our limitations: the narrowness of single sector organizing; the lack of a transnational lens; and the dire need for opportunities to vision instead of defend. It is out of these concerns that this thesis comes. Too many of the young people that I organized with in Philadelphia fought hard for education justice in their city, but didn't necessarily see themselves as connected to those fighting on different fronts. They didn't always recognize their work and the privatization of education in relation to the job market that kept on shrinking; the social services that continued to dwindle; the voting rights that kept rolling back; the threat of homelessness and incarceration that consistently lurked around the corner. Much less did they relate to those facing similarly oppressive conditions in communities across the world. They did not see themselves as a part of a global movement for social justice. By not cultivating this analysis, we do ourselves a disservice and limit our sense of our own power.

I chose to tell the story *in this way*, because I want it to be heard and made one's own. I have had the privilege of studying and slogging away at a dense academic thesis once before. I poured my heart into a project that, unsurprisingly, will never be as important to anyone else as it was for me. That's not the point. The point is that I missed an opportunity to engage with people about the things on my mind and heart. Things that might actually matter to them. What I ultimately wrote, I was eager only to be done with and to share with a handful of colleagues. I didn't want to bore my mother or disparage the people I interviewed. The same people who faced the issues I attempted to discuss and theorize. I do not want this thesis to sit on a dusty forgotten shelf in the back of an ivory tower. I want it to be torn apart and grappled with. I want it to come alive for people and strike each one differently. For the characters to wander through the readers' living rooms and sit down to dine with them; not allowing the comfortable distance of social science. I want for everyone from my mother, to my advisor, to the lady who runs the laundromat next door to be able to see themselves and each other in these stories. And to challenge and rewrite them. I hope that by engaging with one another we can spark imaginations of possibilities, and eventually, together, bring in the harvest.



## INTRODUCTION: CAPITALISM BEYOND BORDERS

Urban planning cannot be a neutral practice as it is fundamentally about making and remaking the landscapes of power in which we live our everyday lives. Given this, as well as the current era of political and economic uncertainty worldwide, it is important that practitioners concerned with just and sustainable growth contend with the realities and transformations of global capitalism. While planners may plan and plot locally, the purse strings attached to their tools are entangled across boundaries at every scale through the process of *neoliberal globalization*. In this section I will draw from a number of scholars to briefly outline the ascendance of this modality, its implementation and consequences, and its larger implications for both planning and social movements on a global scale.

### ASCENDANCE

Terms like ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘globalization’ have been so widely bandied about that they are often left vague and empty of meaning. Therefore, let me begin with a clear break down of the concepts as I intend them, largely drawn from radical geographer David Harvey. In his seminal work *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey defines *neoliberalism* as, “A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”<sup>1</sup> Within this model, as he describes, the limited role of the state is to facilitate and guard this framework and to support the thriving of markets. In tandem with this, he defines globalization in spatial and economic terms, calling it “A geographical restructuring of capitalist activity across the face of planet earth, the production of new forms of uneven geographical development, a recalibration and even re-centering of global power and a shift in the geographical scale at which capitalism is organized symbolized by the growth of supra-state organizational forms.”<sup>2</sup> This represents a particular phase in the growth of capitalism in which local economies are much more deeply entwined and interdependent than ever before.

Many scholars, including Harvey, look to the history of Neoliberalism’s ascendancy to argue that it was and continues to be a *political project* to protect and maintain the interests of a ruling class. At the end of the 1960’s and into the 70’s high levels of unemployment and inflation caused stagflation across the world

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey, David. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2007. (2)

<sup>2</sup> Harvey, David. "Globalization and the spatial fix." *Geographische revue* 2.3 (2001): 23-31. (24)

and signaled a crisis of capital accumulation (Harvey 2007:12). Widespread discontent posed a political and economic threat to ruling elites the world over, and “the upper classes had to move decisively if they were to protect themselves from political and economic annihilation” (Harvey 2007: 15). It was in this state of crisis that neoliberalism was ushered in through the facilitation of an *ideological* and *economic* shift.

The *ideological* foundations of neoliberalism are often credited to political philosophers and economists, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, who espoused a “free-market” ideology that uplifted the values of individual freedom and denounced the state as excessively constraining. According to their “logics of individualism and entrepreneurialism” citizens were to be reconstituted as “consumers and clients.”<sup>3</sup> As scholar and activist Angela Davis argues, “the very concept of the public good and the very concept of ‘community’ are...eliminated to make way for the notion of ‘individual responsibility.’” This change in perception normalizes “pressuring the poorest people in a society to find solutions to their lack of health care, education, and social security all by themselves—then blaming them if they fail”<sup>4</sup>. The doctrine grew out of the context of expanding Soviet power with the argument that “state led capitalism, under Keynes in Britain and Roosevelt in Europe, was the first step on the road to communism” (Leitner 2007:6). The agenda was therefore aggressively backed by the right-wing, and with time would successfully shift general consciousness towards a new hegemony.

In *economic* terms, global ruling elites saw in neoliberalism “an opportunity to boost profits by reducing state intervention” (Leitner 2007:7). Economists and policy makers alike began to argue that Keynesian economic models and welfare protections of a Fordist interventionist state had to be abandoned in order to bring back stability. In practice this was a dramatic economic transformation comprised of “attacking all forms of social solidarity that hindered competitive flexibility...dismantling or rolling back the commitments of the welfare state, the privatization of public enterprises...reducing taxes, encouraging entrepreneurial initiative, and creating a favourable business climate to induce a strong inflow of foreign investment” (Harvey 2007: 23). Across the world, Neoliberal tactics were increasingly supported by institutional elites and “operationalized by the audacious restructuring strategies of vanguardist politicians like Pinochet, Reagan and Thatcher”<sup>5</sup>, successfully consolidating wealth in the hands of the elite. As will be discussed, the path varied significantly based on country contexts, but Neoliberalism quickly gained

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<sup>3</sup> Leitner, Helga, et al. "Contesting urban futures: Decentering neoliberalism." *Contesting neoliberalism: Urban frontiers* (2007): 1-25.

<sup>4</sup> Davis, Angela. "Recognizing racism in the era of neoliberalism." *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues* (2013): 165-178.

<sup>5</sup> Brenner, Neil, Jamie Peck, and Nik Theodore. "Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways." *Global networks* 10.2 (2010): 182-222. (2)

currency across the world with a number of devastating effects for ordinary people.

## IMPLEMENTATION & INEQUALITY

To organize understanding of how neoliberal globalization functions, scholar William Robinson highlights four key general characteristics: the rise of 1) transnational capital, and global production and financing 2) a transnational capitalist class 3) transnational state apparatuses 4) new relations of power<sup>6</sup>. To his first point, he argues that we have moved beyond the mere integration of markets and toward the “transnationalization of the production process, of finance and of the circuits of capital accumulation” (Robinson 3). This understanding of a dispersed process of accumulation is critical because it demonstrates the heightened level of interdependence between nations and regions as well as the complex and fluid nature of capital. National boundaries are no longer constraining in the ways they have been in the past, and much of international relations are predicated on facilitating capital mobility. The rise of a Transnational Capitalist Class he argues is particular to this moment in capitalist expansion and involves the consolidation of power beyond a national boundary (Robinson 23). Robinson draws a distinction between “participation by capitalists in the world market, which dates back hundreds of years, and participation in a globalized production and financial system, which is a phenomenon of recent decades” (26-27). Contrary to the traditional Marxist arguments put forth by some, he argues that while the nation state still plays a pivotal role in class formation, capitalist globalization “creates new forms of transnational class alliances” and “new forms of class cleavages” at multiple scales (27). This is an important point to be further discussed as it potentially serves to both strengthen and abstract the elite, safeguarding them from social movements. The Transnational State apparatuses is a “loose network made up of trans and supra-national organizations together with national states that functions to organize the conditions for transnational accumulation” (Robinson 2). He argues furthermore that it is through these networks that the TCC aims to organize its power. Transnational institutions operate globally in service of the neoliberal state. Organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization regulate global trade and finance and have opened countless global economies to market principles, encouraging massive privatization and deregulation. To Robinson’s final point he describes “novel relations of inequality, domination, and exploitation in global society” (2). This is perhaps the most tangible of characteristics as we observe

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson, William I. *Global capitalism and the crisis of humanity*. Cambridge University Press, 2014. (2-3)

neoliberal globalization's effect, or at the very least, correlation with negative outcomes in communities across the world.

While the global trends are useful, it is nonetheless important to bear in mind the varieties in implementation of neoliberalism. As will be discussed in the methodology section, this project draws inspiration from (and extends beyond) three cases: the US, Puerto Rico and India. While each of these exhibits some of the general characteristics described by Robinson, they also have their own particularities and distinct political economic histories with pivotal moments that are worth briefly highlighting.

In the case of the US, the Reagan administration ushered in the Neoliberal era in 1980 by overseeing "deregulation, tax cuts, budget cuts, and attacks on trade union and professional power," and further reduced corporate tax rates from "70 to 28 per cent in what was billed as 'the largest tax cut in history'" (Harvey 2007:25-6). Reagan also deregulated the financial sector laying the groundwork for the eventual financial crisis. The state's role in social welfare was drastically reduced. Even prior to his arrival, the United States had already established itself as an economic world power so that globalizing a neoliberal agenda and establishing a new hegemony was not such a difficult task. Unlike the US, both Puerto Rico and India share in a history of colonialism that could be seen as paving the way for externally enforced economic adjustment. Imperial governance structures were set up to extract wealth, to the enrichment of distant European nations and to the detriment of the colonies. In many ways, this allowed for the first wave of state-sanctioned privatization and commodification, which neoliberal policies have continued.

In the case of India, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh instituted neoliberal reforms in 1991 under structural adjustment conditions set by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, including "devaluation, fiscal correction, trade liberalization, financial sector 'reforms', deregulation, and privatization," followed by India's joining of the World Trade Organization.<sup>7</sup> As Arundhati Roy describes, these changes "open[ed] up a previously protected market to global capital, with natural resources, essential services and national infrastructure that had been developed over fifty years with public money, now turned over to private corporations."<sup>8</sup> With the majority of the service sector centered in cities, populations began to urbanize and support for a more developmental state waned. The state bowed to the market, and foreign direct investment gave rise to the middle class prompting its heralding as a "roaring capitalist success" (Walker 560).

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<sup>7</sup> Walker, Kathy Le Mons. "Neoliberalism on the ground in rural India: Predatory growth, agrarian crisis, internal colonization, and the intensification of class struggle." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 35.4 (2008): 557-620. (559)

<sup>8</sup> Roy, Arundhati. "The doctor and the saint." *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition by Dr. BR Ambedkar edited and annotated by S. Anan*. New Delhi: Navayana (2014: 27).

In the case of Puerto Rico, colonialism is a current reality. After being exploited for sugar cane in its early history, in the 1990's it became a "tax haven for manufacturing and pharmaceutical companies, and a military stronghold and bulwark against the spread of communism in Latin America"<sup>9</sup>. As the tax codes were rewritten at the turn of the century and capital began fleeing the island, Puerto Rico tried to repair its recession by taking on massive debt "supplied by Wall Street firms eager to market its triple tax-exempt bonds to wealthy and middle-class Americans and Puerto Ricans" (González 2017). Puerto Rico now faces a crippling \$123 billion debt. As an "unincorporated US territory" with no voting power or sovereignty, the island is barred from US bankruptcy provisions and neither can apply for loans from the International Monetary Fund or World Bank. In 2016, Puerto Rico was instead forced to accept the imposition of a fiscal oversight board, a seven-member group comprised of bankers, lawyers, and bankruptcy judges, that meets primarily in New York and is charged with re-establishing economic stability. Previous governments have "privatized state companies, reinforced law-and-order programs and negotiated loans for public works that benefitted major companies,"<sup>10</sup> but this board has so far proposed sweeping neoliberal austerity reforms. Last week they announced the closure of 179 public schools next year, have called for a 450 million cut to the public university system and are now "eyeing the privatization of the government-owned electric company, of the water and sewer authority, even of the public transit system" (González 2017).

In each of these cases, inequality has and will continue to play a central role. As described above with regard to the political project of the elite to consolidate wealth, neoliberal globalization creates and relies upon inequality to function. Harvey contends, "Redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of Neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project" (2007: 16). The impacts are staggering. In 2013, the "lower half of the global population possess[ed] barely 1% of global wealth, while the richest 10% of adults own[ed] 86% of all wealth, and the top 1% account[ed] for 46% of the total."<sup>11</sup> While it is hard to make a case for direct causation, Harvey provides a clear depiction of how the top 1 percent of income earners across Britain, France and the US steadily increased their share of national income after the implementation of neoliberal policies. The costs have long been unevenly shouldered, and for some communities more than others, the restructuring has been violent. As Nicole Aschoff notes of the US:

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<sup>9</sup> González, Juan. "Puerto Rico's \$123 Billion Bankruptcy Is the Cost of U.S. Colonialism." *The Intercept*. N.p., 09 May 2017. Web. 11 May 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Marichal, Carlos. "After the Default a Neoliberal Debt Solution for Puerto Rico." *NACLA*, 8. Aug 2015. Web. 02 Apr. 2017

<sup>11</sup> Klein, Ezra. "10 Startling Facts about Global Wealth Inequality." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 22 Jan. 2014. Web. 12 Feb. 2017.

*“The past few decades have seen real wages stall and then drop for most workers. Families have had to work harder and longer to stay in place, and many can’t even manage that. Good jobs — those with humane hours, decent pay, and benefits — are scarce, and anxiety about the economy is persistent. The rich are riding high — bolstered by tax cuts, corporate subsidies, bank bailouts — while poor and working people stand on the sidelines”<sup>12</sup>.*

This marginalization of the working class is often disproportionately worse among low-income communities of color and among women. Attacks on organized labor lead to worsened working conditions; decreased regulation leads to further environmental degradation; competition for investment leads to relaxation of land use and increased displacement. And already vulnerable populations bear the brunt of all of this.

In India, the “one hundred richest people own assets equivalent to one fourth of its celebrated GDP. In a nation of 12 billion, more than 800 million people live on less than Rs 20 a day... Politicians and political parties have begun to function as subsidiary holdings of big business.” (Roy 27) As the economic base shifted from rural to urban, the minority urban elite has been able to hold greater sway over economic policy decisions<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, Neoliberalism has “had the support of the Indian elite, represented not only in the form of class, but also caste, power” (Ahmed 38). After independence, scheduled castes (SCs) saw some relatively “positive economic development with increased possibilities of education and work, but with structural adjustment and liberalization for the economy in India from 1991 and onwards, the positive trend was reversed.”<sup>14</sup> The SCs were again further marginalized when “parts of the public sector and education programmes, hospitals, and banks were privatized” (Ahmed 38). Another major setback was that affirmative action quotas failed to materialize in the private sector, so that “Dalits were disadvantaged by the development that had taken place, even though the Indian middle class was growing” (Hardtmann 100). As Roy argues, the caste system becomes blended into capitalism in “a disquieting, uniquely Indian alloy” (29).

## SPACE & THE STATE

Two of the perhaps most central aspects of Neoliberal globalization, both in its facilitation and its consequence, are that of space and state. Many may argue that the increased connectivity of the world has fundamentally reordered our spatial reality and rendered the state obsolete; however, the reality is far more nuanced.

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<sup>12</sup> Aschoff, Nicole. “The Glory Days Are Over.” *Jacobin*, 20 Mar. 2017. Web. 07 Apr. 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed, Waqar. “From mixed economy to neo-liberalism: Class and caste in India’s economic transition.” *Browser Download This Paper* (2009). (42)

<sup>14</sup> Hardtmann, Eva-Maria. *South Asian activists in the global justice movement*. Oxford University Press, 2016. (100)

First it is important to maintain a political understanding of the concept of space. Ideas presented by the likes of Thomas Friedman, that the world has been flattened and space “neutralized by global communications and hypermobility of capital,” must be debunked.<sup>15</sup> To this end, Harvey emphasizes the need for a more dialectical understanding, such that geography is not simply responding to increasingly global flows, but also that “distinctive geographical processes of the production and reconfiguration of space have created the specific conditions of contemporary globalization” (Harvey 2001: 24). In other words, the manipulation of space has allowed for the further mobilization of capital. Harvey contends that globalization is itself a contemporary version of a “spatial fix” to account for the reappearing capitalist crisis of over-accumulation. Through one aspect of this theory, he posits that “surpluses of capital and shortages of labor...can be ‘fixed’ either by the movement of capital to areas of labor surpluses and/or weak labor organization or importation of cheap labor...into centers of capitalist development” (Harvey 2001: 26). Contradictions of capital can therefore be displaced through geographic expansion and restructuring. This will vary with context but could look like suburbanization or increased immigration. Harvey goes on to discuss another aspect of fixity in the need to “pin down capital” through the “production of fixed and immobile capital in the built environment” (2001:27). He offers the example of highways to facilitate suburbanization. Thus physical and material changes are implemented so that the “two kinds of fixes both feed off each other to stimulate symbiotic forms of accumulation” (2001:28). Harvey makes a compelling argument about the contradictions embedded in the capitalist production of space, but he does not stand unchallenged. William Robinson warns against the reification of space, claiming that Harvey ascribes to the concept of territory a “social existence of its own, an agentic logic”; Robinson prefers to see “space” first and foremost as a “social relationship” (106). He critiques Harvey and calls for an epistemological shift in which it is not assumed that the “process of uneven accumulation...takes a definite and even fixed territorial or geographic expression” (107). Instead he emphasizes exchanges between people and social groups claiming that “middle-class and affluent sectors in India, China, Brazil and South Africa may benefit as much as their counterparts in the First World global cities from spatio-temporal fixes that offload crisis to the global poor through neo-liberal mechanisms” (108). According to Robinson, remaining fixed to the independent existence of territory obscures this more complicated reality of social relations.

While the nuances of the disagreement are a bit difficult to tease out, it is undoubtedly easy for both to accept that neoliberal globalization has entailed a particular process of rescaling, accompanied by the

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<sup>15</sup> Sassen, Saskia. "Whose City Is It? Globalization and the Formation of New." *Sustainable cities in the 21st century* 145 (1999). (207)

shift in the role and function of the nation-state. The first and most obvious point here is that neoliberalism and the spatial fix are not “atomized, individual site process(es)” but instead represent a global phenomenon, with wide, mainstream and even hegemonic acceptance.<sup>16</sup> As such, at the level of the nation, Saskia Sassen argues that “globalization de-nationalizes national territory” in order to open it up to new claims from global capital. (Sassen 214). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that national sovereignty was the cornerstone of imperialism. They claim that the concept is now giving way to a logic of global sovereignty indicative of Empire, a “decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open expanding frontiers”<sup>17</sup>. The nation state thus diminishes in significance and is ‘hollowed out’ as the supra- and subnational scales are emphasized (Leitner 2). As is considered a hallmark of this transformation, the state retreats as private enterprise steps forward, cities are thrust to the frontline and new transnational regimes of governance emerge. However, within all of this, it is exceedingly important not to lose sight of the agency of the state. The state, “with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting [neoliberal] processes” (Harvey 2007: 159). Critically, the role of governance has changed. As Sassen claims, “The state itself has been transformed by its role in implementing the global economic system” (Sassen 214). At multiple scales, government is now increasingly evaluated and “largely defined by the ability...to assist, collaborate with, or function like the corporate community”(Hackworth 10). States were drawn to the opportunity that neoliberal policy presented for addressing fiscal crises and now must compete for investment by incentivizing business through mechanisms like lower tax rates, at the loss of social welfare spending. By deregulating markets and increasing privatization, governments boost corporate profits while diminishing community control and accountability. They play an active role in facilitating the mobility and redistribution of capital in the interests of the elite.

## TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

These are tumultuous times. The election of US President Trump and his adoption of an “America First” national agenda, as well as the rise of ethno-nationalism across the world brings the conversation about neoliberal globalization to a critical juncture. In the most recent wave of capitalist crisis, states have undermined their legitimacy by acting in the service of transnational capital, in place of a redistributive

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<sup>16</sup> Hackworth, Jason. *The neoliberal city: Governance, ideology, and development in American urbanism*. Cornell University Press, 2007. (81)

<sup>17</sup> Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Harvard University Press, 2001. (xii).



state. Instead of attempting to reassure or incorporate those segments of the population that have become surplus labor, the neo-fascist state “tries to isolate and neutralize its real or potential rebellion, criminalizing the poor and the dispossessed, even tending towards genocide” (Robinson 104). This can be seen in systematic state violence in the form of an increase in land dispossession, mass incarceration, excessive policing, deportation, etc. Robinson calls this ultra-right insurgency “21<sup>st</sup> century fascism” or a project that “seeks to fuse reactionary political power with transnational capital and to organize a mass base among historically privileged sectors of the global working class that are now experiencing heightened insecurity and the specter of downward mobility” (163). Just as Trump condemns outsourcing placating the fears of those who envision their jobs overseas, charismatic populist leaders the world over speak to those who feel they’ve been victimized by globalization; through demonization of “the other” they establish scapegoats to distract from the fault of the state sponsored elite. Another strand of hyper nationalism, perhaps portrayed by Narendra Modi, speaks to a new confidence and yearning for more capital induced growth. A recognition of the vast supply of labor and markets that a rapidly growing country like India has to offer a resource intensive capitalist system. On either side of this scenario, neoliberal globalization can be seen as playing a pivotal role in fueling fascist bigotry.

Whether or not one sees the rise of 21<sup>st</sup> century fascism as the end of the neoliberal order or not, what is hard to refute is that this moment signifies a crisis in legitimacy for global capitalism, providing a pivotal opportunity for strategic revolt. As Leitner affirms, even within the context of a neoliberal globalized world, “there are clearly non-neoliberal social and spatial imaginaries, alternative forms of subject formation, and newly emerging practices of contestation –including alternative economic and social practices and innovative alliances across multiple axes of social difference” (Leitner 22). Sassen similarly argues that with globalization comes an “unmooring of identities” that allows for new solidarities and claims of entitlement. Since the global recession of 2008, popular perception seems to be shifting away from a blind acceptance of the primacy of market interests and towards a deeper questioning of the political and economic status quo, at a global scale. As Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward suggest, a change in consciousness begins with the system’s loss of legitimacy, followed by the assertion of rights and efficacy. This eventually coalesces into a change in behavior via defiant collective action<sup>18</sup>. Certainly, social movements do not always follow such a formula or maintain the consistent pressure needed to secure transformative change. However, in this seemingly catalytic moment, it is important to engage in dialogue

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<sup>18</sup> Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard A. Cloward. *Poor people's movements: Why they succeed, how they fail*. Vol. 697. Vintage, 1979. (3-4)

emphasizing that, “The only viable solution to the crisis of global capitalism is a massive redistribution of wealth and power downward to the poor majority of humanity...and the only way such redistribution can come about is through mass transnational struggle from below” (Robinson 213). Such movements do exist, but they must be strengthened, uplifted and widened at a mass global scale.

This call for transnational social movements has long been issued by transnational feminists. Global conditions of entrenched patriarchy and sexism have given rise to a diversity of feminisms, among which the lens of transnational feminism critically centers both a critique of capitalism as well as the diversity of material conditions. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, “In the absence of studies that examine US Black women in a global context, such work can foster the assumption that US *foreign* policy is not important for African-American women.”<sup>19</sup> This curtails social justice on both ends, by suppressing the questioning of Western militarism and by limiting the potential support and solidarity afforded to those subjugated domestically. Transnational feminists recognize this imposed limitations and question the nation-state given the too often truth that “national interests in actuality are special interests ” as discussed above (Collins 230). However, this is no accident. As Dalit feminists have long pointed out, in many cases across South Asia, feminism emerged interlinked with nationalism and held a “strategic function in the political movement” (Hardtmann 83). This function was the creation of a particularly upper-caste Hindu cultural identity, one that Dalit feminists strongly reject. These scholars and activists insist on a more intersectional understanding of oppression, urging for what Chandra Mohanty calls an “anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and contextualized feminist project to expose and make visible the various, overlapping forms of subjugation of women’s lives”<sup>20</sup>. Transnational feminism thus promotes the understanding that globalization is gendered “as it entails the exploitation of poor Third World women: It has generated an increased participation of women in low-paying and insecure jobs, a large number of poor women from the South migrating to better-developed parts of the world in search of low-paying and degrading jobs, and the firing or layoff of a disproportionate number of women.”<sup>21</sup> Based on this reality, they condemn neoliberal economic integration and deregulation and call for the “building of feminist solidarities across the divisions of place, identity, class, work, belief and so on” (Mohanty 530). This seems to me to be the most promising possibility of our time.

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<sup>19</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge, 2002. (231)

<sup>20</sup> Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. ““Under western eyes” revisited: feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles.” *Signs: Journal of Women in culture and Society* 28.2 (2003): 499-535. (515)

<sup>21</sup> Herr, Ranjoo Seodu. “Reclaiming third world feminism: Or why transnational feminism needs third world feminism.” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 12.1 (2014): 1-30. (12)

In order to forge this transnational movement, there are a number of challenges within locally oriented resistance that are important to consider and overcome. The issues are complex, and some of their nuances will be raised in the chapters that follow. I will not attempt to dissect them fully here, but simply call them out. Some of these barriers, many of which overlap, include:

- 1) *Non-profit Industrial Complex* – Through the establishment of foundations and the institutionalization of funding streams, resistance work has become professionalized, which has a number of effects: Potential targets are offset because of their philanthropic work; Incrementalism is encouraged because you do not want to work yourself out of a job and funders will likely not support anything too radical as they are tied up in the capitalist system; More resources are devoted to data tracking, etc. to prove efficacy to funders; Varied social justice initiatives are competing for a limited amount of funds.
- 2) *Sectoral Fragmentation*- This could also be seen as a result of professionalization. Funders will rarely support general operating needs, but instead prefer specific projects as they are easier to package. Specialization, crucial to the industrial capitalist system, is replicated here. In this model, professional activists are meant to carry particular skills and focus on singular issues, just as entire sectors are meant to stay in their frame. This clearly prohibits a more explicitly movement building strategy.
- 3) *Reformism* – Small-scale adjustments are prioritized by funders who have much to lose from more radical change. Governments have grown accustomed to providing small handouts in a sort of ritual placation. Furthermore, conservative policy makers and pundits have long outmaneuvered the left in developing narrative that appeals to the masses.
- 4) *Overemphasis of Identity Politics*- Activists and organizers across the spectrum of identity politics have waged a very valid critique of a purely class based argument for social change. Aspects of identity like race, gender, sexuality, caste, etc. will not simply disappear through economic change and must be addressed specifically. However, it is also dangerous to entirely subvert a class analysis to an identity based one, as the limits the opportunities for strategic solidarity, particularly in the context of global capitalism.
- 5) *Limits of Electoral Change* – Electoral victories are vulnerable, and can easily swing back and forth. They are susceptible to over-emphasis on charismatic or bigoted leaders, drawing attention away from systems analyses. Democratic systems are subject to the tyranny of the majority. Furthermore an organizing strategy that focuses here will likely still have to fold to

the pressures of capital, because it operates at such a powerful global level.

- 6) *Lack of a Transnational Lens*- Those perpetuating social injustice are no longer operating at just a local level, but resistance has for the most part not kept pace with globalization. Ironically, philanthropists are encouraging place-based organizing at a time when capital is increasingly transnational.
- 7) *There is No Alternative (TINA)*- This dominant discourse, a hallmark of Neoliberalism, has pervaded consciousness. Any successful movement has to shift this understanding so that people believe in the possibility of more just alternative systems. Still the systems that are created must be careful not to replicate existing hierarchies of power and must uplift movement work instead of simply divorcing from it.

## METHODOLOGY

With this thesis, I seek to intentionally make a radical shift in the mode of production of planning knowledge; as such I explore the above concepts through a number of alternative means. The first is the use of a synthetic case study approach. While the case study method is often used in social sciences, it is nevertheless worth noting a few of the central tenets of the debates surrounding its application. Bent Flyvbjerg considers the issue in depth and refutes a number of “misunderstandings” that posit case study research as unreliable. He values the richness of context conveyed via case studies and emphatically insists that they are “important for the development of a nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule- governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process and in much theory.”<sup>22</sup> He further argues that “there does not and probably cannot exist predictive theory in social science” so that “concrete, context-dependent knowledge” ultimately prevails (223). I conducted interviews, observational analysis and retrospective professional reflection in the contexts of Philadelphia, Puerto Rico and India. Furthermore, the case studies as utilized here are not entirely self-contained. Instead they will be used to inspire narrative, and will be synthesized with experiences pulled from other similar contexts. For example, the true stories of education privatization in multiple American cities may be drawn together and depicted as a single case. Some may levy the argument that this is misleading and wholly inaccurate, however the method here is intentionally hyperbolic. Weaving together cases allows for an understanding of the potential trajectory as well as the real severity of an issue

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<sup>22</sup> Flyvbjerg, Bent. "Five misunderstandings about case-study research." *Qualitative inquiry* 12.2 (2006): 219-245.

at a larger scale. This further speaks to the shift in scale demanded from the transnational approach outlined above.

The second alternative method is the use of narrative fiction to illuminate the substantive concepts at hand. Urban Planner Leonie Sandercock argues for the importance of storytelling, saying “Much of what planners do...can be understood as performed story. Yet the importance of story has rarely been understood, let alone validated in planning.”<sup>23</sup> She argues that stories provide a richer understanding of the human condition and thus should be centered in planning education and practice. What Sandercock theorizes and advocates for, I attempt here to carry out. Flybjerg describes case studies as substantially comprised of narrative. Via other scholars, he argues that narratives are “perhaps our most fundamental form for making sense of experience...but also provide us a forward glance, helping us to anticipate situations even before we encounter them, allowing us to envision alternative futures” (240). According to Flybjerg, narratives draw their strength from embracing complexity and contradiction and resisting scientific rigidity and classification. Michael Hanne similarly argues that it is the “internal narrative faculty that makes it possible for each of us perpetually to construct and reconstruct our sense of ourselves as individuals, located socially and in time and space.”<sup>24</sup> A further extension of this narrative form is fiction, a type of academic inquiry that is perhaps more common and more powerful than often realized. Literature does not exist in a vacuum but emerges from a socio-political context, thus lending authors the space to wage meaningful social commentary and even affect change by catalyzing readers and shifting public opinion. As Hanne argues, literature can in some cases even be seen to catalyze shifts in political reality. Author and activist Arundhati Roy has claimed “fiction is the truest thing there ever was.” Fiction allows for the drawing of connections that may be relatively obscured in real life. She claims, “The writer is the midwife of understanding. It's very important for me to tell politics like a story, to make it real, to draw a link between a man with his child and what fruit he had in the village he lived in before he was kicked out, and how that relates to Mr. Wolfensohn at the World Bank.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, fiction allows for the use of imagination—a capacity often flattened in scientific writing and crucial to global justice movements. Robin Kelley argues:

*“Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of*

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<sup>23</sup> Sandercock, Leonie. “Out of the closet: The importance of stories and storytelling in planning practice.” *Planning Theory & Practice* 4.1 (2003) (12)

<sup>24</sup> Hanne, Michael. *The power of the story: Fiction and political change*. Berghahn Books, 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Barsamian, David. “Interview with Arundhati Roy.” *Progressive.org*. N.p., 16 July 2007. Web. 1 Feb. 2017.

*social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way.*<sup>26</sup>

This tool of imagination draws us away from reactionary lines of defense and toward a proactive place of visioning, what Kelley terms ‘free spaces’.

The final alternative method utilized in this thesis is that of popular education. Following each chapter below is a curriculum guide meant to catalyze engagement with the substantive issues discussed. The purpose of this method is to disrupt dominant paradigms of power with regard to knowledge production and to promote true dialogical engagement with the ultimate aim of combating oppression. This method is most clearly articulated by Paulo Freire who explains that the “pedagogy of the oppressed [is the] pedagogy of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation”<sup>27</sup>. He argues that traditional forms of education rely on a hierarchy between teacher and student and insist on a logic of banking, such that information flows in a singular direction. Freire, in considering all the themes of capitalist oppression named above, insists instead that teachers and students must become equal subjects engaging in “problem-posing education- which accepts neither a ‘well-behaved’ present nor a predetermined future- roots itself in the dynamic present and becomes revolutionary” (84). This is precisely what this project aims to do by inviting a collective assessment of different segments of the global fight for social justice and a re-imagining of its future possibilities. This work clearly builds off of my planning education and thus would complement the learning of my peers and colleagues, but it is also intended to reach a wider audience of community members, and workers, and youth, and caretakers and anyone else to whom issues of social justice matter. The style of narrative and popular education set forth here is meant to be widely accessible so that a dialogue can be truly inclusive—from those laying down the cities to those living in the heart of its interior. Planning knowledge and personal experience are all political and can be put to good use in creating more just communities.

## LAYOUT & LIMITATIONS

Following from this theoretical overview, this thesis is divided into four chapters, each followed by a relevant workshop facilitation guide. Chapter one follows a girl in a Northeastern City of the United

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<sup>26</sup> Kelley, Robin DG. *Freedom dreams: The black radical imagination*. Beacon Press, 2002. (9)

<sup>27</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000. (35)

States as she struggles to understand the school to prison pipeline and the scope of education justice. Chapter two tells the story of a woman in the Caribbean who grapples with colonialism and environmental justice. Chapter three is about a woman in South Asia who tries to make sense of the intersections of caste, class and land. The fourth and final chapter is a re-imagining of what transnational resistance could look like. Facilitation guides will elaborate themes central to each of the stories and are meant to serve as organizing tools for social justice institutions to advance global solidarities.

This work has a number of clear shortcomings that must be addressed. First and foremost, it is important to state that transnational movements do exist. A number of grassroots organizations and broad based coalitions have been doing the critical work of challenging neoliberal globalization across sector and across national boundaries. This thesis is not an in depth analysis of their existing meaningful work or their history, though research of this nature would certainly be useful to informing future movements. Instead, this thesis is meant to cultivate an understanding of the need for an increasingly transnational frame to social justice work. Through highlighting the shortcomings that often plague organizing, I hope to highlight the ever-growing sphere of influence of neoliberal globalization, as well as to uplift the possibility of new and strategic modes of action. This is not a critique of existing transnational social movements but instead a call to wage more.

In addition, while this work seeks to push the envelope of social justice imagination, it is limited in that it does not flesh out the alternative and beautiful future that is to result from transnational movements. I am seeking to push forward the thinking on what organizing can look like, but will not be able to articulate a vision of the world thereafter. Not yet anyway. Still, it is important to stress the value of that work. Planners, and artists and politicians and workers and children and people of all sorts should be using this tool of imagination to regularly recreate what we think is possible. Only by seeing where we are headed can we truly chart the course.

Lastly, this thesis would have been deeply strengthened through the creation of a more participatory process. I did conduct research and interviews to inspire the stories you will read, but certainly I am only able to scratch the surface of these conditions as real people experience them. Through fiction, I have no intention of disguising my positionality, but I did not want to distill these stories through the voice of a privileged academic. Instead I wanted to push the academic community to consider the voices often left un-included or acknowledged. Still I think the stories would be stronger, and potentially more impactful as an organizing tool, if written together with women based in each of these communities. In the future, I can envision a project that uses the tools of participatory action research to co-create stories. Or

even simply the leveraging of an academic platform or audience for people to tell their stories on their own, in front of a new set of listeners.



## **PART I: STORIES**

**JAYLYN**

She was shocked by the strength of her voice. It rose out of her like thunder, rattling her ribs in her chest. Still, she found an eerie calm at the center of her own storm. While everything else thrashed around her, Jaylyn stood poised. The room was hers.

“We are sick and tired of being told that we’re not good enough, that we don't count! We won’t accept your budget cuts, your school closures. We deserve and demand better!”

All of their hard work had come down to this moment and she could hardly believe she was the one up front. A sea of people in brightly colored t-shirts had filled the halls of the School District building and were hanging on her words. The officials at the front of the room sat and listened with a strange mixture of boredom and anxiety. They were familiar with the message, but hadn’t expected, and didn't appreciate, such a stir in their own home.

The timer on the podium flashed a red light three times in quick succession, a warning that Jaylyn’s allotted time was nearly up. She remembered the red lights that spilled through the window and danced on the ceiling 6 weeks ago, the day that Amir left. Maybe somehow he could hear her, she thought. Maybe somehow he was watching. Jaylyn nervously fingered the silver jaybird that dangled from her neck, swallowed hard, and pressed on. At her prompting the crowd clapped and chanted in a passionate call and response that would have given her mother’s church friends some serious competition.

Whose schools?

*Our Schools!*

Whose city?

*Our city!*

Whose nation?

*Our nation!*

The whole room was on its feet. She had gone well over time by now and the police began to edge in from all sides. Jaylyn's heart raced. She threw a hurried black fist in the air and ran back to her friends, some giggling, some stern, but all brimming with pride. This was what power felt like.

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In the weeks before, Amir's letters kept coming. Jaylyn felt sick to her stomach every time she got one.

She lay in bed, the bottom bunk, and switched the most recent arrival from hand to hand, tracing the outside with her finger. The sharp edges of the white envelope forced her imagination of the cold cell her brother must have written from. This one was decked out in blue pen on both sides. Prison bars boxed in her name and address and a bird with plush outstretched wings soared right through them. She'd always wished he'd followed his passion for art. In some twisted way she was grateful that maybe now he'd have time.

Sometimes it took days for Jaylyn to work up the strength to open the letters, much less to respond. It stung her heart too badly. Most of the time they didn't say much. He bragged about how jacked he'd gotten, sent messages for the girls he was talking to, teased her about the senior prom, asked for money on his books. Still you didn't have to dig too deeply between the lines to feel his pain. Plus there was the whole twin thing.

Since they were kids they'd shared everything, from bunk beds right down to their socks. Even countless secrets. They'd had those freaky twin experiences that people talk about, but never really believe. *She* would fall off the monkey bars and *he* would come home with a bumping head. *He* would get in a fight and *she* would feel an ache in her gut where the other guy's punch landed. *She* would kiss her first girl when no one was looking, and *he* would come home with a smirk and all sorts of questions.

The one thing they didn't share was a love for school. Since Jaylyn could remember, she had loved to read. When they were kids, their mother religiously took them both to the Arch street public library on Saturday mornings (these days it was boarded up, and Boozy Jimmy had made the front steps his castle). Every week Amir would sit sulking on the little red beanbag by the window, shoelaces untied, still wiping the sleep

from his eyes. Jaylyn, on the other hand, would be spinning through the aisles stroking the colorful spines of each and every book, relishing the sweet smell of old paper and ink. She could never choose just one and instead would plop beside her brother with a teetering stack. While their mother used the computer, usually searching for jobs, Jaylyn would sound out the words to her brother. His eyes always fixed on the brightly painted characters stretched across the pages. Together they'd take off chasing dragons, solving mysteries, fighting crime. Sometimes he would try to read, but he'd usually slam the books in frustration saying the words were dancing, flipping upside down and backwards. Some teachers said Amir was lazy, but Jaylyn didn't think so.

Ms. Apple really got to him. She had come to Franklin High School a year ago and looked younger than half the students. Her brown hair always bounced in an extra peppy ponytail and her smile was so wide it was almost aggressive. The students were told they were supposed to love her. She was young. She was eager. She was Ivy-League educated. She represented an illustrious brand that was known for churning out teachers. Ms. Apple was freshly minted, armed with five weeks (total) of training and the best of intentions to close the achievement gap once and for all.

Since her arrival, the students fell into a few different camps. There were those, like Jaylyn, who didn't really care who she was. They showed up to learn, did their work and kept it moving. No fuss. Then there was the gaggle. They were fascinated by her shininess, the sleekness of her hair, the point in her shoes, the strange things in her lunch. Ms. Apple was a beacon of hope in a world of discord and misfits. They envied the ease of her life that screamed from the pictures on her desk. Lingering beside her gave them a taste of everything they thought they'd never have.

And then there were the skeptical ones, like Amir. Him and his crew wondered how many *Dangerous Minds* type movies she'd seen. They waited for her to break. To run back to the predictable security of the suburban cul-de-sac she came from. *Plus, what the hell kinda name was Ms. Apple?*

She gave Amir a lot of attention, often waffling between something like flirtation and punishment. Maybe because he effortlessly won the love of students that she tried so hard for. She would never have that swag. That trust. That easy confidence. Maybe she wondered who he was to deserve it all.

The one memory spun around Jaylyn's mind like her brother's pawnshop turntable. She had felt stuck in a groove and dizzy with regret since it happened. Ms. Apple had gone too far that day. They were reading the Diary of Anne Frank. She'd asked for volunteers and Jaylyn, though quiet in most of her classes, had maintained her love of books. She waved her skinny arm in the air. Amir was minding his own business, head down, focused on an epic doodle. A labyrinth of a concentration camp outlined with razor wire, tucked into the shadows of his own city skyline.

"Amir. Read for us please."

"Nah, I'm good."

"It wasn't a question Amir. Come on, give it a try. Page 34 last paragraph."

"I said I'm good. Make Spikey read. That punk's always got a book up his ass anyway. Tryna act white and shit."

The class snickered. Spikey adjusted his glasses and pretended not to hear. Amir was usually friendly to him. It was sad to see him turn.

"Amir, you know we don't talk about color in this classroom. We're all the same here. You know, you could really learn something from Spikey. Or from your sister for that matter."

Jaylyn looked down and used her fingernail to scrape back the brittle wood at the corner of her desk. Words choked in her throat.

"Think about Anne Frank. You have opportunities that she never did. You just need to reach out and grab them." Amir said nothing.

"Ok, well if you're not going to read, then maybe you should head to the principal's office."

He kept his head down, drowning her out and pressing his pen to the paper. Ink bleeding out over the clock tower and flooding the camp. Ms. Apple looked embarrassed that nothing she said seemed to be working. Hoping to be reaffirmed, she paged the front office. In minutes two school police officers came bounding into the room.<sup>28</sup> Their navy blue suits were stark and ominous against the childish posters on the walls.

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The first weeks after Amir's arrest were torturous. Their mother, Irene, cried all-day and prayed all night. Jaylyn felt a rock in her stomach that she couldn't digest. She should have said something. Done something. She was angry with Amir and yet proud of him somehow.

Every day she felt as if she were missing an arm or a leg. That ghost feeling that war vets get, reaching to scratch something that isn't there. Amir was the loud one, always filling holes in conversation with whatever popped into his mind. A perfect combination of endless curiosity and the gift of gab. Now, the quiet was deafening. Jaylyn couldn't remember a time when she'd been left so alone with her thoughts.

Since then, the walls of her school seemed more apparent. The dull grey bricks stacked one on top of another were cold and severe, reminiscent of the jail walls up on State Road. It was a two-hour journey to visit him.

Every morning at Franklin High, Jaylyn passed through the metal detectors and shrank with the shame of it all. A guy who looked just like the cop that cuffed her brother passed a wand over Jaylyn's chest, smacking his gum and hovering a second too long. She watched her friends moving through the line in sleepy robotic compliance. Accepting that this was the way things had to be, or they might all kill each other. Self-destruct.

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<sup>28</sup> “Many under-resourced schools rely on police rather than teachers and administrators to maintain discipline. Growing numbers of districts employ school resource officers to patrol school hallways, often with little or no training in working with youth. As a result, children are far more likely to be subject to school-based arrests—the majority of which are for nonviolent offenses, such as disruptive behavior—than they were a generation ago. These arrests for minor infractions disproportionately target students of color and students with disabilities” (American Civil Liberties Union).

Ms. Apple's class was a joke for days after the incident. Some people were stunned into silence. Others didn't bother coming at all, in fear or maybe even in protest. Even Ms. Apple herself seemed uncomfortable, wounded even, by what she'd signed off on. She fidgeted at the front of the room and mumbled, but never acknowledged what had happened. She tried a few times but could never meet Jaylyn's sharp eyes.

One Tuesday after class Jaylyn's best friend Yasmine passed her a black flier with a red "X" and the word "walkout" written below. Like nothing Jaylyn had seen at the school before.

"Yo have you seen this jawn?" Yasmine was always hyper. At this point in the day her headscarf was balled up at the bottom of her fake Coach purse. Bright pink glittery lip-gloss highlighted the braces flashing across her teeth. She spoke English the way she spoke Arabic---a mile a minute and as if breathing was entirely unnecessary. These days it was too much for Jaylyn's heavy head. "People are saying they're closing our school. Not just ours, a bunch of em!"

"What? Stop playin', Yasmine."

"I'm so serious! Everyone in the city is gonna protest. Just up and leave school in the middle of the day!"

Jaylyn didn't know what to think. On the one hand it didn't matter; she was graduating and the school had some serious problems. On the other hand, what about all her friends, her cousins that still went there? What about the teachers she loved? "If I believed you, which I don't, this shit wouldn't do anything to solve it. They won't listen to us!"

"It's worth a shot isn't it? Franklin ain't perfect, but do you really want it to close? Plus, I know things have been rough since Amir left. You need to have some fun!"

"We'll see. I gotta get to class."

The bell tolled and Yasmine shoved the flier into Jaylyn's bag as she pushed past her. Jaylyn didn't even realize until a few hours later when she was sitting in the computer lab. She peered through her clear backpack<sup>29</sup> at the frayed folders all in a row and saw the red "X" poking above. Jaylyn pulled the paper from her bag and shook her head, thinking Yasmine was always dragging her into stuff.

Still she was curious. She found the Facebook page from the flier. *Were thousands of people really gonna go to this thing? They were probably just trying to get out of school.* She glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one was looking and scrolled through the endless posts:

*Devonte Briggs: Saturday 9:45 pm*

Hands off my music program! Playing the drums is my favorite thing about school! No joke I won't come no more.

*Ximena Alvarez: Friday 7: 26 pm*

We have one guidance counselor for like 1000 students!!! Now you want to cut more? How the hell am I gonna get into college?

*CiCi Bubbles: Sunday 11:12 am*

Anybody notice how they ain't said shit about cutting money for school police?...Smh...

A comic posted by some kid named Shakur2000 jumped out at her. On the left was a school and on the right was a prison, and a massive water pipe snaked across carrying kids from classrooms to cells. A banner above read "The School to Prison Pipeline." Jaylyn wasn't sure she fully understood, but still it felt close to home. She imagined herself in free-fall down a pipe surrounded by darkness and the rush of cold air. Landing with a thud at the dead end of her life, right there beside her brother.

Now she had questions. A thousand of them bursting forth like popcorn in her head. This was not just about better books and music programs. This was something much bigger. Jaylyn needed answers.

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<sup>29</sup> Clear backpacks are increasingly mandated at schools perceived to be at "high risk" across the country. This is a way to surveil students and monitor for weapons.



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The day of the walkout was tense with uncertainty. Some students at Franklin High struggled to keep hush their excitement, communicating plans with furtive glances in endless hallways. Others were bold and blatant making no secret of their intentions. Most welcomed the break in routine.

Teachers ran the gamut- some conflicted, some cautious, some threatening expulsion, some leading the charge. Principal Muñoz was tipped off by a shaken school district. He wanted to support them, but his job was at stake. The intercom screeched and crackled overhead --- “All students are advised to remain in school for the duration of the day. Early leave will not be granted without parental check out.” It was half-hearted.

Jaylyn’s stomach was double knotted, like the laces of the shell tops she’d been trying to keep white since the seventh grade. Her toes felt more cramped than usual. She wanted to go, but the thought of the police made her palms sweat. They were always watching. *What would colleges say? Forget that, what would her mother say?* As the clock inched closer to 12 noon, a slow and heavy silence wrapped across the school. The gradual stretch of a rubber band. And then it snapped in an explosive release.

“Walk out! *Bang bang bang!* Walk out! *Bang bang bang!*”--- Kids in the halls made quick use of the lockers to amplify their call. They raced through the school and flung open classroom doors to project their chants.

It was a flurry of chaotic movement. Bustling bodies and backpacks. In the end Jaylyn was propelled out of her seat by a voice in her head. Amir’s voice maybe. She didn't remember making a decision, but instead was carried out, lifted by the energy of the scrambling crowd. If everyone else was doing it why shouldn't she? She was more curious than indignant. She knew the fuss was warranted but wasn't entirely sure what it was all about; going was the only way to find out.

Jaylyn followed her friends streaming into the street and spotted Yasmine at the front. Yasmine flashed a smile and beckoned her over— “Jay! I knew you would come!” A few flustered school officials paced back and forth across the grounds, hopelessly barking into walkie-talkies. They couldn't contain them. Other

teachers and staff joined the throngs. Some students took the free ticket out and boarded buses home, but most---after corner store pit stops for hot fries and soda---made their way to the heart of it.

The streets were more than electric. They were alive.

Jaylyn stood at the front of the school district and watched as students poured in from all sides. There were thousands.<sup>30</sup> It was the most epic let out she'd ever seen. From the 7/11 right down to city hall, the street was so thick with people you couldn't tell where the asphalt ended and the sidewalk began. Staffers emerged and stood in the windows of the district building, impressed by the swelling crowds.

People were supposedly carried there by anger, frustration and a sense of justice, but Jaylyn couldn't help but feel like she was at Carnival. The sun was shining. There was music playing. People laughing and doing the wobble. The vibe was damn near joyous. Never in her life had she been around so many people her age, and it felt good. Still, bicycle cops stood at the ready like a battalion on horseback. *They took themselves way too seriously, but nobody better try anything dumb.*

At quarter past one there was commotion with a raucous circle of young people in red shirts up near the front. Out of the group a small brown scrappy looking girl clamored up to the back of a white flatbed truck. She steadied herself and waited for quiet, scanning the crowd. And then she went in, without so much as a stutter.

“My name is Jovanna Rivera. I'm here today because I know that I, that all of us, deserve better. I'm here today to fight for my rights and save my school.”

The crowd hollered and this ordinary girl became a giant right before Jay's eyes. She went on to lie out what they were up against.

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<sup>30</sup> Students across the US, including Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and more, have staged walkouts in recent years drawing thousands in protest of budget cuts and school closures (Fox 2016).

“This school district says they have no money, so they plan to close 60 of our public schools.”<sup>31</sup> *Jay didn't realize it was so many.* “They plan to cut our sports, our music, our counselors. But of course charter schools will grow. Pretty soon we'll be like New Orleans. We'll have no public schools left.”<sup>32</sup> *She'd thought about going to a charter once, but didn't want to deal with the uniforms.* “We didn't get the chance to elect these people, so it seems they don't give a damn about us.”<sup>33</sup> Like they haven't stopped for even one second to think about the effects this will have on students.” *Was voting really an option?* “Plus do we really buy that they're broke? Do ya'll know who made this recommendation? A consulting group from out of town. How much were they paid to make these plans? 1.5 million dollars!<sup>34</sup> AND Governor Smith just approved plans for a \$400 million dollar prison right outside the city.<sup>35</sup> AND the biggest corporation in the entire city pays no taxes.<sup>36</sup> How does this all add up? Well, it doesn't!”

Jay felt her shoulders tense and her muscles tighten. All around her people were shifting their wait and shaking their heads. A few intermittent chants. The sun now felt less like a blessing and more like it was singeing her skin. Boiling her blood to the point that it uncorked some anger deep inside of her.

Things were far worse than she had thought.

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Jaylyn closed the door gently, clutched her backpack to her chest and tried to creep quick and quiet to her room, but it was no use.

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<sup>31</sup> The Philadelphia School District in 2012 planned to close 60 schools and drastically cut programming in order to balance the budget (Khalek 2013).

<sup>32</sup> After Hurricane Katrina, 7000 teachers were fired and almost all schools were taken over by the state and turned into charters (Brown 2015) .

<sup>33</sup> In 2001 the state took over the Philadelphia School District, as has been the case in many cities across the country, citing low academic achievement and budgetary concerns. The School Reform Commission (SRC) is appointed by the mayor and the governor with no local accountability. (Steinberg 2001)

<sup>34</sup> In 2012, the Philadelphia School District hired the Boston Consulting Group, a global business consultancy to advise a district-wide efficiency overhaul. BCG was paid at least \$2.7 million through funds raised by pro-charter school and pro-voucher entities. (Khalek 2013).

<sup>35</sup> In the context of school closures, the state spent \$400 million to build a new prison for Philadelphia prisoners (Khalek 2013).

<sup>36</sup> “Philadelphia's 10-year tax abatement program gives building owners and developers a 10-year pass on property taxes on new construction or renovations, depriving Philadelphia schools of nearly \$50 million in 2014” (PCAPS 2012).

Her mother had heard her. “Oh Lord, help this gyal recognize the error of her ways. Help she to see ain’t no sense in complaining. Help she to be grateful. To take pity on my heart. Lord help her realize that if she keeps going this way she’ll end up with she brudda.” Her patois flowed thick and full of flare when she was mad.

Jaylyn’s mother, Irene Jones, had emigrated from the West Indies when she was just twenty-two. Jaylyn knew that she felt neither here nor there over the span of decades, and that faith was the home that she clung to.

She sat in a sofa chair that was far too big and bulky for their tiny living room. The arms were frayed and the blue velvet headrest discolored from the grease in her hair. The *Price is Right* hummed on an ancient TV that, by some grace of God, no doubt, still worked. *Behind this door we have... a new car!*

“Hi Ma,” Jay said, collapsing on the couch. She loosened the two thick cornrows tugging tightly against her scalp. Her usual.

“Don’t ‘hi Ma’ me. I saw you and your friends on the news. Why would ya do all this protesting nonsense? That’ll bring nothing but trouble.”

“Ma, don’t be so dramatic. It was just one day. Everybody was doing it.” Jaylyn planned to go back. “Plus nothing woulda happened to us.” She hoped she was right but couldn’t really be sure.

“ ‘Nothing woulda happened,’ she says. Just like nothing happened to your brother? Jay can’t you just go ‘bout your life like a good normal girl? Go to school? Get a job? And would it kill you to try on a dress?”

As a relatively new American, Irene pressed firm, and often excessive, expectations on she and her brother. Jay imagined they were the same ones that had been placed upon her. She’d been taught not to ruffle feathers and to keep her head low, if she had any desire to stay. These days the fear seemed to come back with a vengeance.

Jaylyn rolled her eyes and fled to the kitchen. Her mother followed. Without mentioning it, they began warming up leftover jerk from the night before.

Jaylyn licked her fingers. "Its not illegal Ma. It's our right to protest. Plus you know nothing's normal these days. You said you been watching the news, right?"

"Of course I have! And I know things are crazy. That idiot has already wrecked this country, and he's barely even started, but there's nothing much we can do about it. We need to go on about our business and pray. Pray that God knocks some sense into that fat, hard head of his. Prayer is the only answer."

Sometimes Jaylyn envied her mother's faith. She craved the comfort of believing something so deeply. The warm safety of a paradise to look forward to.

"And what if he doesn't? No disrespect to God, Ma, but seems like he might need some help with this one. Plus what are we sposed to do in the meantime? Just sit around and watch our schools close and our people get arrested? Even if that idiot gets knocked down you know there will be another one right behind him. Things still wont be right here. They haven't been for a long time."

It was easy to talk to her mother. Jaylyn wished she'd had the same confidence her brother had outside the four walls of her home.

Her mother shook her head in a rare bout of speechlessness. Half joking, half serious, she asked, "So what, my rebel dawta, do you propose we do?"

"Simple. We fight."

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The youth center always smelled like pizza and markers. "Join the Movement" was painted across one wall in carefully planned out graffiti. Jaylyn loved the place and became a regular after school. Got her own red

T-shirt, too. She felt like every time she went to a meeting she came out with her eyes open a little bit wider. As an added bonus, the center was usually flooded with cute girls from schools all over the city.

The scrappy girl from the walkout, Jovanna, was a regular. She was Puerto Rican with big round eyes and a never quite indoor voice that Jaylyn quickly began to love. Jovanna made quick work of bringing Jaylyn into the fold and helping her understand the meaning of the school to prison pipeline cartoon that had sparked it all for her.

“It’s not like an actual pipe, obviously. It’s a system. Know what I mean?” Jovanna raised her eyebrows and searched Jay’s face for a clue. Finding none she continued.

“Take me for example. In middle school I took an apple to school. I had a toothache and didn’t want to bite into it and I always hated cutting them ahead of time cuz you get that weird brown stuff. Anyway, long story short I got cuffed for having a butter knife in my lunch box...I was 11.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Yup. But it’s not just me you know?” Jaylyn knew. “And its not just butter knives. It’s just the whole vibe in schools these days. If they close all these schools you know how many are just gonna end up in the streets? But the schools that we have are far from perfect. Most of em spend more money on police than they do on counselors. You keep treating us like we’re not worth anything, like we’re criminals... Well shit at some point we’re just gonna believe you.”

It was complicated and grimy beyond belief. Thinking back on her friends, she realized how many had been caught up in it somehow and “pushed out”<sup>37</sup> of school. Marcus, who was a computer whiz and bored out of his mind, couldn’t bring himself to stay in class. Vanessa had been suspended so many times she didn’t see the point in coming back. Ximena had tried to so hard to catch up in school after having a baby, but she could never seem to get there. Plus childcare was mad expensive. Jose who’d left school to help put food

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<sup>37</sup> The term “pushout” emphasizes the structural forces that lead to young people leaving school instead of individual culpability. In a report created through participatory action research, four main themes were identified as contributing to school pushout in Philadelphia: boredom and engagement; teaching and classroom learning; discipline and climate; and out of school issues (Youth United for Change 2011)

on the table because his parents were couldn't find work. These were not thugs. They were kids, her friends, who really wanted a good education. Just like Amir.

“And there’s companies that make money off of this stuff?” Jaylyn asked, already knowing the answer but needing to hear it said.

“Yup. It’s crazy right?” Jovanna palmed her fist. “Corporations control politicians. Politicians control the money. And money controls our classrooms. So they got a constant flow of bodies filling their cells and guap lining their pockets.”

It was a lot to chew and at first, and Jaylyn had trouble swallowing. She’d almost rather have had the bliss of ignorance, but she knew she had to sit with the truth. For her brother of course, but also for everyone else.

Little by little, she chipped away at the world that she thought that she knew. Uncovering the secrets she realized she’d never find in her busted Civics textbook. Each evening she rode the El back to 52<sup>nd</sup> street and walked up the block with her senses sharpened, her mind calling out things she wouldn't have noticed before and asking new questions.

She thought of the city and how nothing had been built by accident. How organic grocery stores and beer gardens seemed to follow the footsteps of college kids. As they showed up, bodegas disappeared and so did many of her friends.

She wondered where the men on the corner had gone to high school. If they’d been pushed out. If they’d been to prison. If in lock up they’d sewn bras or milked goats for pennies on the hour<sup>38</sup>. If there were any white boys on the inside with them.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> A caveat to the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment of the US Constitution allows for slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment for a crime. Most prison inmates are required to work either for the prison itself or for businesses (like Victoria’s Secret or Whole Foods) through convict leasing partnerships. They are paid close to nothing (Benns 2015).

<sup>39</sup> The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world and, “No other country imprisons so many of its racial and ethnic minorities...Although the majority of illegal drug users and dealers nationwide are white, three-fourths of all people imprisoned for drug-offenses have ben black or Latino” (Alexander 2010: 6/97).

Jaylyn passed by Rising Sun restaurant enticed by the perfectly greasy smell of sesame chicken. She peered at the dimly lit pictures of food hung above bulletproof glass and felt guilty for all the times she and her friends teased Mr. Cho. Laughing as he read back the order of “fliced lice”. Jaylyn had definitely heard him say the n word before, though. Now she thought about how they’d been divided and conquered. How they should have been on the same side.

Further down Jay passed the Walmart where she bought most of her clothes, and where her mother worked the checkout for nine dollars an hour. She wondered where in the world her shirt had been sewed. How many millions the CEO had made that year.<sup>40</sup>

A group of girls crossed the street in front of her and some men made disgusting offers. Jay thought of her own sexuality that she had hidden for so long. How crazy it was, what the world decided was acceptable.

Every evening she walked through her front door wondering what it would take to bring change.

She had only just begun to connect the dots, but Jaylyn felt like she had to act. She threw herself into the heat of the campaign to save her school. There was always work to be done and a whole cast of characters. Sometimes it seemed they were taking on the world, and even the thought of it was exhausting. There were meetings and sit-ins, surveys and town halls. At protests Jay ran in to all kinds of people she knew — The first (and only) boy she had kissed in the fifth grade, her favorite history teacher from middle school, the cafeteria worker that always snuck her extra fries. Even people she’d clearly misjudged. She felt a part of something big and beautiful.

Jaylyn had always admired the youth leaders who spoke at the rallies. Like Jovanna. They often made it on to the news, red banner flashing behind them. Before Jaylyn wouldn’t dare, for fear of barfing all over her shoes. But these days she thought she could hack it.

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<sup>40</sup> Walmart CEO Doug McMillan makes \$22.4 million per year, while the average cashier makes \$18,000 dollars. (Glassdoor/Horowitz 2017)



It was the morning after she spoke at the School District Meeting, the final one before they made their decision.

The rain made a steady drum beat against Jaylyn's window. It sounded like marching. She jumped out of bed and with single-minded focus ran to the living room and clicked on the TV. There she was on Channel 2 Action News. She should have worn her hair different.

A reporter's voice accompanied the image of Jaylyn at the podium, "At the school district meeting last night, students, teachers and community members rallied to express their disapproval of the district's plans, as they have been doing for months. In a tense meeting running late into the night, district officials decided to spare the following schools from their original list of closures: Central High School, North Springs Elementary, *Franklin High School...*"

Jaylyn let both the remote and her jaw drop simultaneously to the ground, wrapped in shock. *Had they really won?* Yasmine called screaming and confirmed it.

"Jay I told you! I told you we could do it!"

It was a school holiday. No one to celebrate with so she danced around the house alone. She'd never won a trophy. This was a victory she could wear proudly.

She had to tell Amir. After all, it was his victory as much as it was hers.

This time Jay was physically and mentally prepared for the visit, as much as possible anyway. She checked the dress code 10 times. Piercings out. No hoodie. No writing on the shirt. Enough for carfare and extra quarters for a locker just in case. She thought for a second about trying to sneak in a pack of sour gummies, his favorite, in her extra tight sports bra. But who was she kidding? There was no space.

The bus ride was long, the metal detectors and pat down familiar, and the stomach butterflies relentless. They walked through a seemingly endless corridor and the wardens jingling keys gave Jaylyn the shivers. A heavy metal gate shut behind Jaylyn and she immediately wanted to turn back. She'd never been so strongly

compelled to run wildly through a field. The room was fluorescently lit with a CO in every corner and 4 straight lines of blue benches. A single flickering bulb was almost maddening. All but one of the visitors were women—some of them anxiously smoothed their hair, some impatiently tapped their toes and others calmed their restless babies.

The men streamed in, uncuffed one by one. Amir was not the smallest but probably the youngest. In fact he really was much bigger than she remembered. Tangerine was too bright against his deep brown skin.

His bagged eyes lit up when he saw her. Someone he loved. Jay went in for a hug, but Amir threw out his hand for a dap. It was only then that she noticed the poster behind him.

“NO hugging. NO kissing. NO sitting on laps...” It went on. Her heart hurt as she saw from the corner of her eye a baby’s small hands reaching out for her father.

They sat facing each other at a sharp awkward angle. Jaylyn tried to shift her seat but found it bolted to the ground.

“Jay Bird! Thanks so much for coming, man. I miss you. It’s crazy up in here. I could really use my Robin.” He was the same old Amir. Charming as ever. Everything in stride. He rubbed the bones in his wrist and she pretended not to notice.

“First of all, dummy, I was never the sidekick. And of course. You don’t need to thank me. Sorry it took me this long. They wont let me in on school days, but visiting hours are on Mondays. Dumb. Anyway, tryna look grown I see.” Jaylyn made eyes at his long beard and smiled.

“No need to try, Jay!”

She had planned to tell him everything-- the walkout, her speech, everything she’d learnt, the win! But as she sat there the concrete walls closed in on her spirit and somehow it all collapsed. All that she’d won seemed too tiny to matter. Like it would make not even a dent in her brother’s new reality. What had they *really* managed to shake up, to change? *What were they chasing?*

Instead she let him talk as she fought to bring her mind back to the present. It had always come easier to him anyway. He spoke of the food and his friends on the inside. The library and his troubles sleeping.

“You’d be proud sis. I’ve been reading a lot.”

She could feel that there were many things that he didn’t speak of.

Everyone talked quickly, as if desperately trying to catch up on years—perhaps some of them were. Thirty minutes evaporated into five in the blink of an eye and a cloud of memories and promises hung heavy in the air of that room. Jay half expected it to rain.

When it was time to go Amir squeezed her hand and asked, “Did you get my last letter?”

By the time she blinked back her tears he had been taken back into to the belly of the beast, and she realized she hadn’t responded. *What were they chasing?* They escorted her out and she kept trying to find the word dodging her on the tip of her tongue.

Jay stopped in the waiting room until she was processed out and used the spare quarters to buy some stale chips. At the bus stop, she slumped with her head in her hands. The question still pulsing. *What were they chasing?* A ruddy bird walked the whole length of a block on spindly legs and stopped beside Jay. She tossed it a chip and the bird took one step closer. It pecked at the small bits that had fallen, but left the chip untouched, and walked away.

Jaylyn hadn’t really cried since Amir was arrested. Now, sitting on a bench on the side of the road, she found the sobs unstoppable. Her shoulders heaved and teardrops left dark marks on her shirt. Jay found the answer to what they’d been chasing, all in one word—crumbs.

## CAMILA

The decision came down on a Monday. Camila felt as though shackles had been tightened around the wrists of her homeland. As if imperial soldiers were breathing hot air down the necks of everyone she loved, poking pistols in their backs. It was not as if they'd ever left. Here, colonialism was not a cobwebbed skeleton buried in the depths of a closeted history. It was alive and well, a beast to be dealt with on the regular. And these days it was due for a feeding.

*"Mami mami dime la canción!"*

"Amaru I can't sing it right now I'm concentrating."

*"Pero maaaami... Por favor. I will help you!"* Amaru stuck his tiny fingers into the warm red earth, gripped what he could, and dropped the soil at her feet. He placed his chin on her knee and silently begged with a flash of his sparkling brown eyes. Camila felt something melt in her heart, flow up through her veins and stream down her cheeks.

*"Las semillitas son chiquititas, pero tienen poder. Ponlas en la tierra y van a florecer. Piñas para la alma, maracuyá para el corazón. Guayaba para libertad, y mangos para revolución."*<sup>41</sup>

Amaru hummed along, dancing through the vegetable patch of their garden and drumming out the beat on his belly. He picked up a leaf and placed it on his head like a hat. Moving his little body in silly circles his mother couldn't help but to giggle. Amaru had a funny way of making her forget and remember everything all at once.

Camila brushed the sweat and tears from her face and attempted to tuck her stubborn curls behind her ear. Her cotton dress fluttered and brass bangles jingled as she swatted at mosquitos landing delicately on her skin. Unannounced and unwelcome. One successful bloodsucker left a small red perfect circle inside her

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<sup>41</sup>*The seeds are small but they have power. Put them in the earth and they will flower. Pineapples for the soul, passion fruit for the heart, guavas for freedom and mangos for revolution.*

arm. An oddly fitting, if apocalyptic, ending to the lunar phases tattoo that descended from her wrist. Camila dug her shovel into the soil and pressed all her weight through her heel. She continued singing.

*“Las semillitas son chiquititas, pero tienen poder. Ponlas en la tierra y van a florecer. Lo que viene no es mío. El tesoro tan profundo. Lo que viene no es tuyo. Es un regalo para el mundo.”<sup>42</sup>*

The words tasted bittersweet in her mouth. Like *tamarindo*.

Camila gnawed on a stick of sugar cane till the fibers were bone dry and tangled, leaving bits of string on her tongue. She had always loved cane, but anger and frustration seemed to have increased her thirst and fortified her bite.

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During the months before, fears were spreading like wildfire. Flames blazing at the edges of collective consciousness. The fiscal oversight board had not yet been confirmed by congress, but the outlook wasn't good. It was understood that, as usual, they would likely come for everything all at once. Sophisticated thieves masquerading as messiahs in three-piece suits. Effortlessly spewing bullshit about *promesas* and progress. “La Junta” was a far more appropriate name.

Every morning Camila watched in horror as the news flickered while she made Amaru's lunch. Some new development, some new crisis, some new man saying budget cuts were the only way forward:

“Without eligibility for bankruptcy, this new bill is not ideal, but it's the only feasible way to deal with the island's debt. If this bill is passed, a fiscal oversight board would be established from outside of the island and would oversee all financial decisions. Their authority would be final.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *What comes is not mine. The deepest treasure. What comes is not yours. It is a gift for the world.*

<sup>43</sup> In the face of budget deficits, Puerto Rico's governments issued municipal bonds to borrow money. Debt mounted, but Puerto Rico's colonial status barred it from bankruptcy proceedings. The US government instead suggested a fiscal oversight board to lead the charge in implementing austerity measures (Walsh and Moyer 2016).

Twice she'd been so mad she'd made a ham and cheese sandwich and forgot the ham and cheese. Amaru was not pleased.

Still, he knew something was up. He came to her with questions and Camila lost sleep over how much to divulge. How much to erode his innocence. It was as if the sky really was falling and Camila wanted to protect her son from seeing the moon and stars broken and strewn across the ground. She was torn between wanting him to understand and wanting to distract him.

She gripped his tiny hand in hers, sweaty palm to sweaty palm, and walked briskly from the bus stop. The car had broken down again. It was the first day at his new school and they had to make a good impression.

“Amaru, please be on your best behavior today. Ok *mi vida*? It's a great school.”

“*Pero Mami*, I don't wanna go to a new school. Why can't I go back to my old school? I really miss my best friend Jaciel.”

Camila knew she had to tell him. All through winter break, she took the scenic route home past the beach. Half a mile out of the way. Most days Amaru would beg for a quick dip, and some days she would oblige, desperate for the peace, herself. She couldn't bear for him to see La Escuela Primera Muñoz in such a state. The iron gate was shuttered and the plastic letters dangled helplessly from the announcement board in front. The bright blue classroom doors opened out into a courtyard littered with mangled desks and colorful drawings. Decades of learning and community thrown into messy piles like waves, crashing against a looming future. On the outside wall someone had spray painted in a jarring red “*No a La Junta.*”<sup>44</sup>

“Amaru, I'm sorry, *amor*. I know you want to go back to Munoz. We'll talk about it again tonight, but right now just try to make the best of it, ok? I know you'll make lots of new friends.”

After squeezing Amaru extra tightly and passing him off to his fancy new elite private school principal, Camila turned down the quaint cobblestone Calle San Rafael. As had become a nervous habit, she counted

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<sup>44</sup> After over 100 schools have already closed in recent years due to outmigration and economic crisis, the fiscal control board recently announced that the island will see 179 schools close next year alone (González 2017)

shuttered shops “...*seis, siete, ocho, nueve,*” and wondered if they would be back. Had the banks already claimed them?<sup>45</sup> She imagined the buildings crumbling and falling dramatically to the earth. She imagined lush green secret gardens creeping up the inside walls and pouring into the streets. She tried *not* to imagine the debt-saddled families that owned them. Amaru certainly wouldn't believe that they were *all* on vacation. She'd have to think of something else.

Camila snapped out of it and hustled to job number one. Nobody on the island had less than two. With these new school fees and the threat of further reduced minimum wage, she'd been collecting as many as she could find. How could anyone be expected to live off of \$4.25 an hour?<sup>46</sup> Three days a week Camila sold vaguely Caribbean trinkets to tourists for whom economic crisis meant nothing more than cheaper airfare. The store itself was owned by a gringa on an adventurous search for self-discovery. The other three days Camila worked as a midwife and guided women through childbirth, protecting them from ever-eager knives. The fear was well-founded<sup>47</sup>. Fridays, though, belonged to her. Most of them she spent knee deep in the dirt. Planting *aguacates* and pulling up weeds. A passion she'd only toyed with. But these days her time in the soil had become a disappearing luxury. Austerity cutbacks meant shorter workweeks for public employees. Before the school closed entirely, Amaru had kindergarten four days instead of five.<sup>48</sup> His alphabet suffered.

La Junta could only make things worse, and that possibility defied imagination. It was no wonder that everyone was leaving. Only their favorite things they owned shoved tightly into a single bursting suitcase. Tearful goodbyes at the airport were becoming exhausting.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Banks were very eager to finance Puerto Rico's debt, because bonds were triple tax exempt and the Puerto Rican constitution says debt must be given priority over operating expenses (Walsh and Moyer 2016).

<sup>46</sup> PROMESA legislation establishes a minimum wage of \$4.25/hr for employees under the age of 25 (Dávila 2016)

<sup>47</sup> Through law 116 established in 1936, Puerto Rican women were encouraged to pursue sterilization as an intervention to supposedly cap poverty. The discourse was in line with popular eugenics sentiments of the time. Sterilizations were provided free with government funding and no alternate birth control options were made available. By 1968 one third of Puerto Rican women were sterilized (Romano 2017).

<sup>48</sup> Furloughs are mandatory time off imposed on government workers as a way to cut spending. The fiscal oversight board is currently considering this as one option (Teresa 2017).

<sup>49</sup> In 2014 alone, Puerto Rico lost almost 2% of its population via migration. An average of 230 people per day. As many were driven by the decade long recession, this number is expected to climb (Acevedo 2017).

“*An island lives a tenuous life.*” Camila untucked the square flier with the bold lettering from beneath her filthy windshield wiper. Whoever had placed it there and on the row of cars down the street had chosen to be cryptic or poetic, leaving no explanation. Still they succeeded in making her think how true it was. Particularly in the era of climate change, and climate change deniers. Particularly a colonial island, where corporations run wild knowing few will notice the havoc they wreak on the environment. Particularly a colonial island deep in the muddy trenches of debt.

A few times a year, Camila and Amaru made the drive out to visit family in Cabo Rojo. Getting to the west coast only took a few hours, when the car was behaving, but they usually made a trip of it. Stopping in their favorite places for a dip or a picnic or the best *empanadilla con pique* that anyone could ask for.

The last trip began as most had. An overly excited Amaru bounced up and down in his booster seat, kicking the seat in front of him, rattling off all the things he just had to do.

“Mami, as soon as we get there we need to look for shells again! I will find the biggest one and bring it to school! Can we go to *Panadería María* for a pastry? What about the *rio en el Yunque* that we swam in before?”

“*Vamos a ver!*” Camila chuckled and relished in her son’s excitement for life. It made her feel free. She assured him that they would see where the road took them, embracing a sense of adventure on her own.

They rolled down their windows and Camila shoved her most beloved, and heavily scratched, CD into the slot on the dashboard. Bomba rhythms filled the car and Angleró’s voice flowed out of the fuzzy speaker, “*Si dios fuera negro, mi compay, todo cambiaría...*”<sup>50</sup> Camila imagined the fullness of a skirt whipping beneath her and shimmied her shoulders. Amaru swayed smiling ear to ear.

They made their way out of the city passing wide complexes with big box stores stacked side by side. Camila hated the sterility of those places, the sameness, and she was glad to leave them. To watch the stiff lines become blurred in her rearview mirror.

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<sup>50</sup> *If god were black, my friend, everything would change.* (Angleró 2008)



As Amaru dozed off, lulled by the heat and the hum of the sickly engine, Camila turned off the highway in the hopes of finding a faster, though perhaps less scenic route to his favorite river beach. He would wake up giddy. She swerved right and cursed the eighteen-wheelers for keeping so close, shuddering at the thought of being squished between them. The thought of her own fragility. She held her breathe just in case it might protect her from the plumes of black smoke pouring out of their rusty loads. She felt guilty she couldn't do the same for Amaru. *Why were there so many of them anyway?* An army of metal boxes in full formation marching, determined, across the island.

Three lights in, she was stuck. They were all stuck, side-by-side, but it wasn't your typical *tapón*. She'd been in brutal traffic jams where tensions were high, horns were constant and "*cabrón!*" was exchanged through every window. This one was different. People looked anxious. Engines were switched off. A line of worn looking truckers had descended from their soot-covered beasts to eat *tripletas* by the roadside. Camila stuck her head through the sunroof and noticed three long lines of police stretching across the avenue. Hundreds of them appeared to encircle what looked like dead bodies in the street. Her stomach flipped, from revulsion and hunger. She hoped Amaru would keep sleeping.

"Mami, *dónde estamos?* Where are we? Why are we stopped?"

*Mierda* he's up. "Good morning *mi amor*. It's just some traffic. Don't worry." She was worried.

Camila craned her neck again. This time she saw scribbled signs on the other side of the police line. Bright white boards with black skulls and cross bones. They read "*No a Las Cenizas!*" No to the ashes. A break in the police shield revealed that those lying on the ground were very much alive. They had covered themselves in black powder to symbolize the ash, locked arms and put their bodies in the street in protest. Stiff and unmoving under the threat of arrest. The tower of the coal fired power plant loomed large and arrogant in the distance as if admiring the chaos it had caused. It was only then that Camila realized that she'd been riding with the targets all along. The trucks were the ash carriers, the unfortunate foot soldiers of the real villains.

Camila's mother had mentioned it a few times. Kids a few towns over were getting sick a lot, but it was different from Dengue. Tia Isabel's son developed asthma out of nowhere. Prima Maritza complained of

itchy skin and throbbing migraines. Outside the power plants, shiny black dust was piled in vast mounds that slowly disappeared into the breeze. Massive trucks plowed through neighborhoods carrying the toxic gunk to be layered in landfills, leaving behind a thin film on bicycles and baseball bats, smudges on chubby cheeks and sneakers. The dust crept its way into the tiniest most invisible places, and they breathed it all in and out. And who could be sure about the water?<sup>51</sup>

“It’s better that Amaru stays in the city,” Camila’s mother had said. “This wouldn’t happen there.”

Angry and inspired, Camila tightly gripped the steering wheel until small white circles appeared around her knuckles. She grappled with abandoning her car and joining the frontlines. Imagining the rigidity of her body flat against the burning hot pavement. But how could she put Amaru in such danger? Before she could decide, the sea of cars parted, just enough for a paddy wagon to zip through the gap. Baton-clad cops shoved people in one by one and began disbursing the rest of the crowd. Amaru could only see flashing lights. As the cop directed them to pass by, Camila drove slowly and noticed a quietly indignant woman carrying a sign that read, “*Defendemos la tierra para los niños.*”<sup>52</sup> It struck her someplace tender.

They turned off the road and the trip took on a decidedly different tone. Even Amaru seemed to know something had changed. He mumbled to himself and played with his green plastic dinosaur. Camila’s vision was sharper, her heart heavier, her lungs tighter. She was ever more aware of her biology. Her earthliness. Since she was a little girl she’d been a bit claustrophobic. Preferring to be outdoors even in darkness. To eat her rice and beans in the silver moonlight with her toes in the dirt. Her mother never fought it and instead regularly whisked her across the island to soak up all the beauty and wonder that the open land had to offer. She was a proud and patriotic woman who often threw her head back in deep husky laughter, asking, “How can I be poor, when my homeland is so rich?” Over the years Camila began to understand she was only partly joking.

Camila remembered feasting her eyes on the twisted tunnels of the mangroves. Cutting her feet on the slick rocks of the waterfalls. Placing her palm in the sand on the beach and watching her handprint flood with a

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<sup>51</sup> In November of 2016, over 60 people were arrested in Peñuelas, Puerto Rico. They lay in the street in front of trucks from AES Puerto Rico, L.P. transporting coal ash waste to the Peñuelas Valley Landfill. The ash “is known to contain high levels of arsenic, heavy metals and radioactivity”. The largely low-income and majority black. This protest had a very heavy police presence (Santiago, Pincay, Lloréns and Latino Rebels 2016).

<sup>52</sup> *Defending the earth for the children.*

mystical blue light. She remembered sowing seeds on her grandparents farm, marveling at how food burst forth from the earth, all from a tiny speck. A love for nature became braided into the very fiber of her being.

Camila knew the environment was under attack, but she hadn't let herself admit how badly it was losing. As they drove she forced herself to wake up. To reckon with what was here and still to come. She saw the waves on the rocks and accepted that every year sea levels were rising and storms were picking up *fuera*. She saw the cornfields that glimmered gold and accepted that their genes were warped. That the company that made them was drying up the water, gobbling up the land and poisoning the food. All while paying no taxes. The planned incinerator, the fumigation, the shrinking forests, the disappearing fish. It was all a coordinated attack. Slow methodical violence. Likely to be further weaponized by the junta.

She thought of the last sign that she saw and glanced at Amaru in the mirror. The woman holding it was right. Showing him the natural world and teaching him to love it would no longer be enough. He'd have to understand why it was being taken. He'd have to learn to defend it. He'd have to learn to take it back.

Amaru met her eyes in the mirror. As if having traced the ebb and flow of her thoughts he asked, "Mami, will there be any shells left?"

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Scattered protests erupted across the island as the PROMESA decision seemed more eminent. Over education, wages, the skyrocketing price of pork. Many were fresh in the struggle. Fires newly lit in their bellies. Eager to stand for something.

They had been camping outside the federal reserve for weeks by the time Camila had the chance to visit; Amaru was in school and the shop was closed for the day. She'd wanted to come before, but couldn't afford to lose the hours. A problem for many she'd imagined. <sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> In the summer of 2016, activists camped outside of the federal reserve in San Juan to protest PROMESA. They were evicted months later.

Camila sat on a chalk-covered curb admiring their spirit and courage and studying the scene. In the driveway in front of the gates was a cluster of neon tents, a blinding floodlight beating down on them straight through the night. Lawn chairs had been drawn into the center. A splintered coffee table. Stacks of earmarked books. A “People’s Living Room” of sorts. Across the street were the medic and the kitchen, impressively organized. The air between them smelled like coffee mixed with bug spray. A tired chef churned out pasta in mismatched bowls, none of them plastic. Another received donations of bread and peanut butter, a perfect combo with the bananas hung from yarn on the tree above. On the other corner was the stage. A small platform beside the traffic signal where poets and playwrights tried to strike the right revolutionary chord. Where salsaeros worked to breathe life back into the weary. To break down colonialism through dance.

Around one hundred people mingled at the intersection of the main entrance. Debating, strategizing, flirting. They were mostly college students out for the summer. From the same university Camila had attended till Amaru came along. She tried not to pass judgment, but was all too familiar with the types. She had moved through many of the phases herself and suddenly felt old. There were the communists with manifestos in their pockets, the anarchists with lighters, the philosophers and metal heads with long hair and torn t-shirts, the rastas, the artists. Each with their own vision for the movement. Each with their own brand of tattoo intricately inked across their bodies. Camila became quickly uncomfortable in the chunky heels and button down she’d worn to work. She was certain that people had noticed.

She thought too of the people who weren’t there. The people who couldn’t afford to leave work, couldn’t afford to travel across the island, the people who couldn’t afford to lose their spot in line for the handful of public housing that was left.

What seemed like a ragtag crew though could not be discounted. They’d built a home in the middle of the street and had no intention of budging till the junta tore its knees on the pavement. The island needed their boldness, their imagination, their demands. Camila just hoped it would last.

“*Camí, eres tú?*” She turned in the middle of the street and saw Sebastian. He had a stubbly beard and more of a belly than she’d remembered. But still handsome all the same.

“*Si!* It’s me. *Dios*, its been so long!”

“The last time I saw you was when Amaru was born. I’ll never forget clearing the crowd so you could get to the hospital. *Brutal!*” The university had been striking against budget cuts and thousands of students had filled the school plaza. Every time Camila yelled into the bullhorn Amaru would kick on cue. Not yet in the world but ready to fight for his spot.

“ Did I ever thank you for that?”

“Please! No need.”

They spent the next hour strolling the grounds and swapping stories on the years that had passed. Sebastian was well acquainted at the *campamento* and introduced people along the way. They came across a group of young leaders in the thick of conversation and lingered at the edges. Most seemed as though they hadn’t slept in days, tortured by some combination of floodlights, political pressure, and the type of messy love triangles endemic to intense revolutionary spaces. They each spoke passionately, *cigarillos* bobbing at their lips:

“They’ll come for us soon”... “They’re not going to come. They’re afraid”... “We need to do another action”... “What we really need are demands”... “More old people”... “More young people”... “More training”... “More music”... “*La lucha sigue! The fight continues!*”

Camila sighed to herself and stepped away from the group.

“Cami, *que pasó?* Is something wrong?”

“No no. It’s just that I feel like I’ve been here before. We all have. This junta is not the problem. Colonialism is. And we just keep fighting till we can’t fight anymore. Till we’re tired and *quemada*. Till we’re burnt.” She anxiously twisted her hair, remembering the university strikes. The toll it took on her body. Only to come back to the same battle a few years later. “We’re all in a constant *guerra*, and it just seems that we need to spend some more time deciding what we’re fighting for. Building something better.”

Sebastian shook his head in agreement. “Come, come I want to show you something!” Sebastian motioned to the edge of the camp. A corner Camila’s eyes had missed.

They walked along the sidewalk passing squares of perfectly manicured hedges, and Camila frowned, thinking nothing alive grows in the shape of a cube. The box-like plants ended abruptly at a point where the soil had been set free. Between the street and the sidewalk a small papaya tree grew out of wet and freshly turned earth. Her eyes widened as she took in sprouts of okra, basil, lemongrass, corn growing against a makeshift trellis of sunburnt wood.

Camila blossomed with delight and excitement, eager to stick her fingers in the revolutionary mud. To move beyond resistance by playing in the dirt. By creating something new, something different. By sewing her own *semillitas*.

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“When the Spaniards came they raped this land.” Camila cringed at the metaphor, fitting as it may have been. She imagined the earth thrashing about in protest. “They uprooted the people. They uprooted *mandioca, maíz, calabaza* in order to plant what would make them rich and leave *las indígenas* hungry! *Azúcar, café, tabaco.*”<sup>54</sup> Lisette’s voice was sweet like honey but strong like stone.

The *finca* was an hour south of the city. Lisette was an old school activist born to a family of independentistas, but she’d grown tired of party politics and forged her own path. She and her partner Fernando had scraped up the money and bought a small piece of land with a dream of collective farming. They’d just returned from Cuba eager to share the wisdom they’d gained from their socialist *hermanas*. Sebastian had brought Camila to the farm to check out the first class.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Spanish first colonized the island of Puerto Rico, expelling and enslaving indigenous Tainos as well as Africans. The US continued cash crop development once they acquired the land. Small scale farmers with limited access to land and credit were forced to urbanize in hopes of more sustainable work (Laedlein 2017).

<sup>55</sup> Small and medium scale farms and schools have popped up across the island in recent years with the intention to grow and popularize the practice (We Feed the Planet 2017).

“It’s called agroecology!” Sebastian was perpetually excited. Boyish in his passion. “It’s basically about food sovereignty. About returning to the land to revive our sustainable agricultural practices that have been trampled. Learning from our ancestors. Growing what we need to survive instead of being dependent. You’ve always had a green thumb. You’ll take to it easy.”

Cami didn’t need much convincing. The creativity alone was enough. She had grown weary of being on a never ending defensive. Running out of ammunition and lowering her shield to beg for crumbs. This seemed like a promising way to turn things around. To build instead of respond.

Camila squatted in the soil, sunscreen slathered across her shoulders. Her calves tired in a way that felt enlivening; muscles she forgot that she had. She and twelve other students had spent the day working the land and learning the techniques. She looked up as Lisette spoke and she wished to one day age as gracefully. A long silver braid at her waist crowned by a deep purple bandana. Her cheeks still flushed pink with passion. Camila shifted her body until Lisette’s head perfectly blocked the blinding sunlight. A golden orb forming a perfect halo.

“Spaniards built their monstrous plantations and enslaved the rightful owners of this land. They ruined the lifestyle and the soil all at once.” She picked up a handful and let it slip through her fingers back to the earth. “Today the exploitation continues. Big businesses are experimenting on us with manufactured seeds and pesticides. Small farms have been wiped out!”<sup>56</sup>

Camila thought of her last trip to the grocery store when Amaru needed a snack. The time she’d spent lingering in front of the watermelons, ultimately landing on some cheesy processed junk instead. A fraction of the cost.

Sebastian nodded his head in agreement and disbelief. “Now we import over eighty percent of what we eat! Eighty percent! *Dime*, what sense does it make for us to import *plátanos* from China?”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> “Millionaire enterprises including Monsanto, Pioneer Hi Bred and nine other multinational producers of transgenic and hybrid seeds benefited from over \$519.7 million in Puerto Rican public funds throughout the last 10 fiscal years.” Even in the face of financial crisis, they have been awarded “preferential tax rates, tax exemptions, industrial incentives and wage subsidies” in addition to often free resources like water (Guzman 2013).

<sup>57</sup> “Total sales from Puerto Rico’s farms have declined by two-thirds, in constant dollars, since 1964”. Imports come in from all over the world. (Charles 2017)

Camila thought of what they would do in the case of emergency. What if those giant boats for some reason couldn't dock to unload their metal boxes filled with precious food?<sup>58</sup> What would she feed her son?

She looked over at Sebastian, his knee high black boots caked in mud and his large straw hat casting a wide shadow over his body. She hated that the word “*jibaro*” came to mind.<sup>59</sup>

“The hardest part will be to change peoples’ thinking about what’s possible,” Camila said to the group. “Many wont believe that we’re capable of sustaining ourselves. Of growing an alternative. That’s half the battle.”<sup>60</sup>

For weeks Camila and Sebastian returned to the farm once a week to learn the tools of the trade. Preparing the soil, seeding, irrigation, organic pest control, managing crop yield. The works. Each of the students committed to taking the teaching forward. In the face of the deepened austerity that La Junta promised to bring, building something of her own brought Camila endless *esperanza*.

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The decision came down on a Monday. The Junta was signed into law.

Amaru was still dancing at the far end of the vegetable patch, and the sun was beginning to set. Juice from the cane had made Cami’s fingers sticky.

“*Mami mami dime la canción!*”

*“Las semillitas son chiquititas, pero tienen poder. Ponlas en la tierra y van a florecer. Piñas para la alma, maracuyá para el corazón. Guayaba para libertad, y mangus para revolución.*

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<sup>58</sup> Heavily dependent on maritime supply chains for food, in the case of any catastrophe Puerto Rico is reported to have only enough food for 2 weeks- 1 month (Teresa 2017).

<sup>59</sup> Agriculture has been stigmatized in Puerto Rico, associated with poverty and a lack of education. The new agroecology or jibaro/a movement is attempting to change that and attract more young people (Charles 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Margaret Thatcher coined the term “There is No Alternative” to justify her conservative neoliberal agenda. The concept became a pervasive ideology (See page 18 above).



*Las semillitas son chiquititas, pero tienen poder. Ponlas en la tierra y van a florecer. Lo que viene no es mío. El Tesoro tan profundo. Lo que viene no es tuyo. Es un regalo para el mundo.”<sup>61</sup>*

As Camila rolled the words around in her mouth, bittersweet like *tamarindo*, she tried to make sense of what she had learnt. Tried to make sense of the song her *abuela* had taught her and her son had grown to love. Tried to make sense of her place in the world, on her island, on her street, in her garden.

The seeds were powerful. A profound treasure, no doubt, and she would lay them carefully. It was the other part. *Lo que viene*. Surely the bounty wasn't a gift for the *whole* world to take. Not for the colonialists, the conquerors, the CEOs, the bankers. But neither was it hers alone.

The papayas she helped grow on the *finca* did little to fill her neighbor's belly. The well she dug could never provide enough clean water for all those suffering from the ashes. The training she'd had couldn't keep Amaru's school open. The money they'd used to buy the farm must have somehow come back to the vulture funds. The devils that created the problem to begin with and now constantly circled above still greedily searching for scraps.

Agroecology seemed a more promising promise than most. But alternatives couldn't mean escaping. Creating a paradise unto ones own. Singing the song, Camila realized that in order to be relevant, they had to disrupt, not secede. To understand the connections. To trace the roots of crisis. To unearth the truth and steal back the ground from underneath the feet of the thieves. To build with the movement, not outside of it. Only then would the struggle bear fruit on which the weariest could feast.

“*Mami Mami*, will you teach me?”

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<sup>61</sup> *The seeds are small but they have power. Put them in the earth and they will flower. Pineapples for the soul passion fruit for the heart guavas for freedom and mangos for revolution. What comes is not mine. The deepest treasure. What comes is not yours. It is a gift for the world.*

## DEVIKA

The glass wall rose, immense and impenetrable, above Devika's head. What seemed like kilometers up above, it cut through the vastness of the sky. A kaleidoscope of steel grey blue, both beautiful and terrifying. Adrenaline raced through her body as she peered through the windows of Star Mall at the life just beyond her reach.

She turned around and was quickly enveloped in a crowd of excited families; Ammachis bent over in too-shiny *sarees*, little girls in oversized frocks. They pulled her into the swarm, swiftly passing through the giant doors. Before she realized, she had emerged on the other side of the metal detector, a sleepy guard waving her on. Devika half expected him to call her back. To tell her she wasn't allowed. But it seemed he could care less.

She walked slowly along the slick floors afraid her feet would slip out from under her. The blast of cold air overwhelmed her entire body, sending a delightful and luxurious shiver down the length of her spine. The scent of perfume was thick and intoxicating, the sight of an ice skating rink downright baffling. She tried not to giggle as she watched a man battle with the moving staircase, legs spreading wide like scissor blades. Devika wanted to absorb it all and capture still frames in her mind. The cold white marble floors that brilliantly sparkled. The neat shops in a row. Big banners with half naked blue-eyed blonde women beckoning people in to buy things they didn't need—plastic Christmas trees, brightly colored yoga mats and crystal figurines.

She couldn't help but remember when the land beneath the mall was nothing more than a paddy field and the faces of friends who had lived there. She pictured the tall green grass studded with men in stark white *mundus*, urging stubborn buffalos. How strange they would look beside the perfectly chiseled mannequins. Now the land was bone dry and the building spanned hectares and hectares. Things were changing fast. Construction cranes were poised like guns across the city, locked and loaded. The buildings had been coming fast, gobbling up the land and scraping bits of sky. Little regard for anyone in the way.<sup>62</sup> Devika

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<sup>62</sup> At least 65 million people were displaced by development projects in India between 1950 and 2005, an estimated 90 per cent for state-run projects (Walicki & Swain 2016). Land acquisition by the state increased rapidly with neoliberal policies, and seized land has been increasingly passed on to private corporations (Le Mons Walker 580).

knew that in theory she should hate them, and she tried. But the harder she tried the more enamored she became.

It didn't matter that she had only change jingling around in her purse. It didn't matter that she was a scheduled caste, a *Dalit*<sup>63</sup>. She was free to roam shop to shop, shoulder-to-shoulder with the cream of the crop. Like everyone else, appreciating everything that glittered. For months Devika passed by the mall on her way to work, but could never bring herself to enter. Just stopped and admired, chest swelling with pride and longing. Now she couldn't bear the thought of leaving. Imagined living out her days wandering through those halls, filling her belly with pizza and ice cream from the food court, taking baths in the wishing well while fishing out coins, dressing up in the finest silks when no one was there to look. Here, everything felt possible.

She stood in the window of a store called Swarovski admiring the threads of glowing crystals dripping like sacred rain from the ceiling. They cast back her reflection in a million shining pieces—her mismatched floral *salwar kameez*, *dupatta* perfectly draped to hide her breasts, frizzy pulled-back hair. She didn't recognize herself. Beyond the raindrops her eyes became fixed on a small crystal swan, elegant and poised. A large man moved in and placed his chubby hands on its delicate neck. Devika hated to see his threatening greasy fingertips on the thinly cut glass. She drew her eyes up his arm and stopped in horror at the rolls under his chin. His face was unfortunately difficult to forget.

Mr. Rajendra was the old overseer at the tea plantation where Devika had once worked. One season the morning mist came in thicker than usual, leaving a chill in her bones. She was keeping unwell and struggled to bend over the bright green bushels, bringing in a consistently lighter load than the rest of the women.

“What’s wrong with you girl? Are you dumb? Have you been sent by Blue Hills Tea to sabotage me?”

“No sir. I’m just feeling sick. I can’t work as fast.”

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<sup>63</sup> Today the word ‘untouchable’ has been substituted with the Marathi word ‘Dalit’ (Broken People), which in turn is used interchangeably with ‘scheduled caste’. The caste system can be traced to Hinduism’s founding texts outlining four varnas that form a hierarchical structure with a “sliding scale of entitlements and duties, of purity and pollution.” Dalits are considered outside of this structure and often face extreme discrimination and violations of human rights. (Roy 20)

“Doesn’t matter. You need to learn your lesson! This is a bloody company, not a charity!”

She remembered how his red eyes bulged. How the veins in his neck seemed to take on a life of their own, a maze echoing the trails cut into the hillsides.

“Sameera come and give this girl a thrashing. She’s a Dalit so I cannot do it with my own hands or I will need to bathe ten times to cleanse the scum from my body.”

She remembered her friend Sameera’s face flush with fear, her feet leaden and unmoving.

“Useless idiot people!” He scowled, grabbing a pole of bamboo. A tight rap stung Devika’s leg and brought her crashing to the red earth below.

She remembered being dizzy with pain, but unsure of what hurt more, the pole or his reason for using it. She focused her mind on something that she imagined felt like a prayer. Tiny black leeches squirmed on the leaves scattered across the ground, searching blindly for blood. But somehow she managed to find her feet and flee from the rest of Mr. Rajendra’s blows. He ran behind, stopping every few seconds, folding over his belly and pressing into his knees to catch his breath, eventually giving up.

She remembered her mother the following day, a self-satisfied grin creeping across her face. “Amma, what did you do?”

“It wasn’t just me. We all went. Me and twenty-one of the women. We threw ourselves on him and hugged him tightly. At the end we stood up and said now you go and bathe ten times a day for the rest of your life. *Chutiya salaa.*”

Devika remembered wanting to say thank you, but being unable to find the words.

She had buried the memory somewhere deep, alongside the rest of them. And now there he was. Right in front of Devika’s face. Violently snatching her perfect glass swan right out of her fantasy. Reminding her of reality. Turning her mind abruptly from crystal to leeches.

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Devika's father was a cobbler by profession<sup>64</sup>, but a self-proclaimed philosopher with wisdom to share on all manner of vice and virtue. Prabhu was an eccentric man with pockmarked skin, wiry grey, always-tousled hair and hands so leathery they seemed to become one with the shoes that he brought back to life. Black polish perpetually stained his nails and smudged his cotton *mundus*. And the strong smell of lacquer became part of his natural musk. Prabhu was also a man tragically in love-- the torturous storybook sort that left him sleepless. Since Asha had passed, his eyes seemed to constantly wander, as if desperately searching for her ghost.

Devika helped her father at his stall once a week on her one day off. At the western edge of the market, they splayed *chappals* across cracks in the pavement-- bejeweled heels and leather sandals. They leaned back against the crumbling concrete wall--- speckled with bits and pieces of ancient posters, it was a collage of the neighborhood through time. The faint outline of a hammer and sickle beneath the freshly plastered mobile number for a paying guest.

Each morning when setting up shop, Prabhu uncovered two frames from a piece of torn newspaper. He wiped the glass gently with the corner of his shirt and blew away the dust gathered in the rough wooden edges. He whispered something indecipherable to them both, and then propped them up side by side against the wall, a tiny wooden Buddha statue nestled in between them.<sup>65</sup> The two images were jarring. From the left Dr. B.R Ambedkar peered through his dark round glasses, a slight smile on his equally round face.<sup>66</sup> The artist who painted this portrait, the same one found in countless homes and shop fronts, chose a happy sky blue as the background. Perhaps to match the doctor's suit. Perhaps to lighten the weight of his words.

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<sup>64</sup> Dalits are typically forced to work as "manual scavengers, the removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers and cobblers." (Dalit Solidarity 2017)

<sup>65</sup> Lower caste Hindus converted to other religions for centuries to evade the stigma placed upon them. Following Dr. Ambedkar's decision to convert to Buddhism in 1935, many Dalits too converted. The number of Buddhists in India rose from 2,478 in 1951 to 2,789,501 in 1961(Hardtman 89 & Roy 52).

<sup>66</sup> BR. Ambedkar was a Dalit politician activist and economist who was a key leader of the anti-caste movement and author of the Indian Constitution.

*“Yours is more difficult than the other national cause, namely Swaraj<sup>67</sup>. In the fight for Swaraj you fight with the whole nation on your side. In this, you have to fight against the whole nation—and that too, your own<sup>68</sup>”*

Devika had clear memories of cramming into dusty corridors of community centers or the cold floor of a neighbor’s home and poring over passages. As a toddler, they felt like parties, and she looked forward to seeing her friends. Later on, they felt like meetings, and she waited for the boredom to end. Then, at the tender age of ten, something began to click. It was the first time that she realized that for some reason society thought she was different. Not to be touched. Not to be married. As if her skin was made from poison.

“Amma why did that man say we have to fight against the whole nation?”

Asha had never sugar coated. “Because we are Dalits. We have been cast out of this country’s Brahminical story, of their imagination. So, we must take care of our own.”

Devika’s eyes welled as she tugged at the end of her skirt, “But Amma, I don’t like to fight.”

Devika would always have trouble swallowing the fact that, for her, being alive was revolutionary.

In the frame on the right, Devika’s mother stood stern and unyielding in black and white. Her plain sari tightly drawn. Hair pulled back, accentuating the harsh square in her jaw. Devika imagined her father’s excitement the day the photo was taken. Ushering his new bride into the photographer’s tiny back room, urging her to uncross her arms, pleading with her to smile.

“Your mother was an amazing woman,” he began the monologue that Devika had come close to memorizing. Shaking his head and fighting back tears. He was a sensitive man, a characteristic Devika usually appreciated, but recently had come to resent.

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<sup>67</sup> Gandhi’s understanding of ‘swaraj’ was about self-rule and the independence of Indian people after the violence of the colonial state. However, Ambedkar worried that the majority community would dictate the terms of swaraj to the detriment of minorities and lower castes (Roy 45).

<sup>68</sup> (Ambedkar 2014: 26.4)

She busied herself sorting sandals. “Yes Appa, she was.”

“Those other idiots were terrified of Asha. She didn’t take any nonsense from anyone.” Her father spoke as if Devika hadn't known her. She wondered if he went through the same speech even on the days she wasn't there. Speaking to no one but the mangy dog that lounged nearby, skin stretched tightly across its ribs.

As if without thinking, he clenched a leather shoe between his feet, freeing his hands to sew on a matching brown strap. His worn metal tools spread on the floor all about him. “She was a much stronger person than me. A much better activist. She didn't just talk about our rights. She actually went out and fought for them.” Devika said nothing. “People like me are useless. We sit around and preach about *Bhima*<sup>69</sup>, but what is the point? We have to actually *do* more for our people.”

This was how she had been raised. In the throws of political debate. Feeling as though the burden of untangling and dismantling the deeply rooted caste system lay firmly on her shoulders. It was suffocating to think only in terms of “we”. Exhausting feeling accountable to people all over, that you’d never even met. People you wouldn't necessarily recognize walking down the street.

“No one will listen to me, but women are better suited to lead this fight. The world is worse to you all. Plus your hearts are bigger, your minds brighter, and your courage more unyielding. Your mother was a perfect example. I wish you would be more like her and less like me. Follow in her footsteps.”<sup>70</sup>

Devika knew her mother was fierce, but she wasn't sure she wanted to be like her. As a girl she was in awe of her defiance and conviction. She watched grown men seek her counsel. Watched angry crowds follow her small bony frame to the fiery frontlines. She wasn't warm in the traditional motherly sense. Lullabies and back rubs were few and far between, but Devika felt loved, nonetheless.

But as she grew older, Devika discovered herself wanting more. She wanted new shoes and shiny hair barrettes. She wanted to go to the movies. To go to school. To eat meat more than once a week. She

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<sup>69</sup> Affectionate name for Dr. Ambedkar

<sup>70</sup> There is a long, rich and multi-faceted history of Dalit feminism and activism including in political organizations and movements oriented toward community reform (Hardtmann & Rose Alex)

wanted to stop talking about being Dalit. She wanted her mother to stop spitting in the faces of her bosses, fighting injustice after injustice. To choose her family over her caste.

Asha refused to choose, and instead they always quarreled, quiet resentment building on both sides.

“Amma can you please try to keep a steady job?”

“My daughter, when will you understand that I don’t fight by choice, but by need?”

“Amma we can’t always use caste as an excuse! Ambedkar wrote the constitution! We’ve had a Dalit president! There are ‘untouchables’ that have written books, built companies, starred in films, you name it!”

On the day of her mother’s arrest Devika felt justified in the anger she held. On the day of her death her anger turned into a massive knot in her gut. One whose frayed ends she couldn’t find, much less begin to untie.

A fellow Dalit sweeper was raped in the guesthouse where her mother worked,<sup>71</sup> a young girl close to Devika’s age whose marriage prospects had now drastically fallen.<sup>72</sup> The manager was notorious for twisting the ends of his greasy mustache while undressing women with his black, beady eyes. He likely didn’t think twice, expecting his devilish deed to go unquestioned, and certainly unpunished. Devika’s mother got wind and led an army of Dalit women back to the site, slapping wooden *jhadus*<sup>73</sup> on the ground in protest. Police rounded the women up in no time. It was the longest group arrest in recent anti-caste history.<sup>74</sup> Thirty days behind bars. In Asha’s case 29, as she fought ‘til the end and refused to eat. 29 days without food. 29 days until her brown skin turned ashen grey. 29 days until the blood drained from her face. Until her last breath left her.

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<sup>71</sup> 90 percent government sweepers “who clean streets, who go down manholes and service the sewage system, who clean toilets and do menial jobs” are Dalits. With privatization, even these working conditions are likely to be worsened and wages slashed. (Roy 35)

<sup>72</sup> “A crime is committed against a Dalit by a non-Dalit every sixteen minutes; every day, more than four Untouchable women are raped by Touchables; every week thirteen Dalits are murdered and six Dalits are kidnapped” (Roy 21).

<sup>73</sup> Broom made of wooden sticks/fibers known to symbolize both the livelihood and oppression of sweeper women

<sup>74</sup> Variation on a real protest in Kollam, Kerala in May 2011. Led by the Kerala Dalit Mahila Federation (Rose Alex 2014:7)



Devika wondered if she'd thought of her daughter. Wondered if it was a difficult decision, or if it was even a decision at all. Immediately after, she was disgusted with herself for allowing such doubt.

The Communist Party candidate swept in quickly. For protecting worker's rights, they garlanded her mother's picture in front of every news camera, slipped crisp notes into her grieving father's pocket. Now, in death, her mother was a hero.

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Even in mourning, Devika could take no time off from work.

Outside the factory, a crowd of protestors waved red flags and chanted slogans. They paid homage to a motley Marxist crew, Che, Fidel, and Devika's mother. They vowed to stay away from their stations, to leave bolts of fabric idling, until worker's rights were respected.

In the factory, Devika bit down hard on the flesh inside her cheek. She squeezed her knees together and clenched her muscles, eyes flashing back and forth between the slowly ticking clock and the panel of red fabric sliding quickly between her fingers. In the vast room filled with women at whirring sewing machines, she imagined porcelain western toilets instead of seats. Each woman free to release herself as she worked. The smell would be awful, but her bladder would thank her.

She learned her lesson early. Got up from her sewing machine to use the bathroom and within minutes came back to a mountain of fabric piled high on her chair. She spent the rest of the day sweating profusely as she tried hopelessly to catch up to the target they had set. Propelled by the people around her whispering horror stories of girls being beaten when they fell behind. The next day, she stopped drinking water entirely.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> "India is one of the world's largest textile and garment manufacturers serving the international and increasingly, domestic market. Many of the workers employed in the \$40-billion-a-year industry are trapped in debt bondage, face abuse or are forced to work long hours in poor conditions" (Nagaraj 2016). Through a global assembly line, large corporations are able to continually move their money across borders in search of cheaper labor and less regulated conditions. Women are the majority of those employed in the garment industry around the world. International and local labor laws exist but are not always enforced (WIEGO 2017).

Working for Laxmi Cottons was a blessing and a curse. She knew she was lucky to get the job. A scout had come to pluck girls from the countryside promising the city had better roads, better transport, and better jobs.<sup>76</sup> Cleaner water and consistent electricity hadn't quite panned out in the Dalit colony, but the money was better. Not good, but better. Six months in to the job she had been able to load her parents and three shabby suitcases on to the train to join her. Plus, she'd always liked making pretty things with her hands.

But the job was far from easy. The women all rose before dawn to board the rickety bus to Laxmi Cottons, not unlike riding a tin can. The sun still lazily rising, Devika could just make out the other women emerging from their homes. Shuffling their *chappals* against the ground, plastic bag lunches at their sides. They waited outside when they arrived, still trying to wake up, until the bell tolled and the blue and gold metal gates swung open. Blinding white lights attempted to make up for the lack of windows. Brightly colored scraps littered the concrete floor. Three pronged metal fans caked in a layer of dust did nothing but move hot air in great circles. Facemasks were unbearable in the heat, so most preferred instead to inhale clouds of tiny cotton particles. Once work started it didn't stop, except for the twenty minutes scheduled for lunch and ten minutes for chai. They worked their needle-pricked fingers, till the work was done. Sometimes eight hours. Sometimes twelve. Six days out of every week.

In moments like this, when she wasn't allowed to pee, wasn't allowed to satisfy a basic human need, Devika typically imagined being somewhere else. Being *someone* else for whom humanity was less restrained. She allowed her eyes to shut. Allowed herself to picture being on the receiving end of the clothes that she diligently sewed. Strolling through Star mall perusing high-end shops. Having a small, neatly wrapped package dropped in her perfectly manicured green lawn by a flying robot. She'd seen it in movies.

Usually Sumitra would nudge Devika back to her senses with a sharp but friendly elbow to the rib, "Where have you gone di? Come back or they'll give you good!"

This time though, Devika imagined her mother. Raising hell on the factory floor. The shouts were so raw and piercing, Devika could hardly believe that no one else turned to look.

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<sup>76</sup> Companies often hire scouts to help lure workers into the city and the garment industry. In some cases they are allowed to stay only in dorms under very restrictive conditions. (The Guardian 2015).

Before she'd passed, Asha had urged her daughter to join the union saying, "They won't care about caste issues, but at least they'll protect your rights as a worker. They need your work, so they should respect you! This is nonsense, not drinking water!" She threatened numerous times to go to the factory herself, but somehow Devika kept her at bay. Often holding water in her mouth and spitting it out behind her mother's back.

Devika kept feeding the panel of smooth cotton into the sewing machine, placing her bare foot on the pedal. She remembered the funeral and the way the white fabric felt rough as she wrapped it around her mother's cold body. She remembered the smell of smoke that rose from the pyre and her father's unembarrassed wailing. But before all of that, she remembered the look on her mother's face. Somehow a light still lingered in her eyes, her mouth still straight and insistent. It seemed her mother was resolute, even in death.

The knot in Devika's stomach had doubled in size and now was pressing its weight firmly against her bladder.

She lifted her eyes and glanced around the factory at the many hundreds of women focused on the work before them, and then she thought of *their* mothers. The backbreaking sacrifices they must have made. The hopes they must have had, that their daughters would have more than them. The disappointment they must have felt when the advancement still left much to be desired.

Devika realized, for the first time, that all along she'd been just as stubborn as her mother. Unwilling to see her side. Devika had been so distracted by the life that she wanted, that she didn't realize or appreciate that her mother was simply fighting to win it for her. Perhaps not a life of crystal, but certainly a life of dignity. Devika felt suddenly both indebted and reborn. Regretting that it took her mother's death to wake her.

Her screaming bladder and haunting mother were a dynamic combination that could no longer be resisted.

"Psst, Sumitra! Let's join the union strike!"

“Have you gone mad? We can't, Devika. They'll fire us so fast! No way!” About half of the women had shown up to work. Not able to take the risk. She knew Sumitra wouldn't budge.

After racing to the toilet, she dodged her manager and headed out to the picket line. Devika got the sense she was about to be baptized by fire. Around 50 women, her colleagues, surrounded the gate wringing their fists in the sun. Men, some workers some husbands some party loyalists, supported from behind. Holding their mundus in one hand, beedies in the other. A few journalists tried to push their way to the front, scribbling notes on legal pads. Police awaited their cue. The women welcomed Devika as a comrade on equal grounds, applauding her bravery. The worker struggle seemed much less lonely.

A man in a freshly starched button down soon emerged from the flanks to deafening applause. She was shocked he deigned to be there, but somehow she recognized his face. Vishwas Nair was running for the highest seat in the state, chief minister. The communist party had lost representative seats in recent years and was hell-bent on making a comeback in the upcoming elections. He made a convincing case.

“The workers of our great state must unite, or conditions like this will continue to go unquestioned! They will exploit you for your labor, paying you nothing to build their empire. The Communist Party belongs to the workers first and foremost. We are part and parcel of the unions, and we will fight alongside you until you get what you deserve!”

Devika chewed thoughtfully on his words and decided that perhaps her parents had gotten it wrong. Maybe the real enemy was the rich, plain and simple. After all, the majority of strikers were not scheduled castes or tribes they were just poor. And they were out there fighting for all worker rights, Dalit or not. He would win her vote.

Devika went home feeling stronger and far more curious. She found her mother's worn copy of the Karl Marx's *Capital* carefully wrapped it in a light blue towel and placed it on top of the metal wardrobe for safekeeping. Consulting it each evening when she returned from the continuing strike, she broke it down bit by bit. Each sentence panging her with a feeling akin to guilt for falling prey to the seduction of capitalism. She remembered her stroll through Star Mall. Each day she inched closer to a new identity, a new community---the proletariat.

“Be careful di,” her father warned. “They never let me move up in the party. Why do you think I left?” Devika had become good at tuning him out.

And victory was sweet. After 9 days Laxmi Cottons gave in. They couldn't afford the time and the training for new workers. Demand was at an all time high from their American buyers. The women returned to their machines aware of their power. Pleased with the longer lunch, the higher pay, the freedom to pee in peace. Devika wished she could tell her mother.

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There were 50 homes in the Dalit colony. Bigger than the one they had left behind in the hills. The homes were small uniform boxes made with big grey cinder blocks. Devika hated the way they scratched her skin, leaving chalk white marks. Around the entire colony, banyan roots were splattered like paint on tall moth-masked walls; heaven forbid a Dalit should step a toe in the Ganapathi temple or sully the pews of the Orthodox Church. The land was littered with rocks. After the British left, land was meant to be redistributed across the state, but scheduled castes and tribes were able to eke out only a few scattered parcels. On most of them, nothing would grow, no matter how hard they tried to coax the soil.<sup>77</sup> The water, too, tasted like metal. As if it had been drawn from the coin-filled wishing well in Star Mall. To be drunk in sips, never gulps. This place had become home, but Devika harbored no quaint illusions. She wanted out.<sup>78</sup>

Hunched over a wood-burning stove, she attempted to make miracles with rice, curd, a scrawny fish, and half an onion. Since her mother passed, the responsibility fell on her. She looked to where the *kariyapela* grew wild, in a patch by the colony entrance, and noticed a small posted sign. The curly letters seemed typed, official, rigid. Placing the clay pot on the floor beside the flame, she hurried to the sign. The two small logos in the corner came slowly into focus—the crest of three menacing lions perched on a wheel; a

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<sup>77</sup> After independence, loopholes in land ceiling laws and redistribution policies failed to deconcentrate ownership among the wealthy and reallocate to the poor. Some states did re-allocate land to lower castes, but often of much poorer quality. The majority of dalits in India are landless (Le Mons Walker 567 & Interview with Sanal Mohan).

<sup>78</sup> Scheduled castes are often segregated from main villages and left without electricity and water. In cities too they are often contained in specific areas and are discriminated against in finding housing (Hardtmann 78 & Interview with Deepak Nikarthil)

blue diamond encased in a golden circle. The words were almost unnecessary, the process all too well known. They were taking the land. Taking it for Laxmi Cottons.

She wanted out, but not like this.

The next morning Devika raced out before conversation spread across the colony. Devika stormed past the factory gates and searched the endless aisles for Preeti, the union representative.

“They’re taking the land!” she whispered sharply, eyes ablaze.

“Good morning Devika. What are you saying? Are you ok?”

“The land, the land, they’re taking it. Laxmi Cottons will throw me out of my home to build a new factory?”

Preeti seemed surprised, but Devika couldn't be sure.

“Please, we have to do something. Where will we go? There are 15 other girls from my colony who work here too. The union must strike again!”

“Ok ok. Don't worry. I'll talk to the guys and see what can be done. I'll let you know tomorrow.”

The rest of the day passed painfully slowly. Devika couldn't believe she was enriching the man who would rob her, or perhaps the woman. She'd never known who Laxmi was. Every shirt she cranked out seemed to pull coins from her purse and blood from her veins. Not unlike the leeches.

She rode home unsure of how to face her father. Unsure of how to comfort him.

The tiny TV flickered from the corner of their dark single room. Prabhu sat on the edge of the bed close enough to press the buttons below the screen. Nonsense news mostly about nothing. And then there he was again. Soon to be chief minister, Vishwas Nair. Devika grew again with pride.

“Appa Appa, raise the volume! I know this man!” He was speaking at a general press conference. A journalist asked him about the new development slated for Devika’s neighborhood. Devika waited with confidence for a stern rebuke.

“Isn’t that the same dirty idiot who gave me money when your *Amma* passed? I only accepted to give her a proper funeral.”

“No chance Appa! It can’t be!”

The candidate went on, his eyes straying from the cameras, “We will not stand in the way of the new phase of development on Panampally Street. We must ensure that these companies, like Laxmi Cottons, are in compliance. However, we recognize the opportunity to bring investment to our roads and schools and to provide good union jobs.”<sup>79</sup>

“He’s definitely that same idiot.” Prabhu shook his head. Devika’s heart sank to the dirt between her toes. The ghost of her mother stood ready by the door.

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<sup>79</sup> In a major controversy of 2013, the Kerala Communist Party of India (Marxist) chairman vowed that the party would not to stand in the way of the development of Lulu Mall in Kochi (The Hindu 2013). Even leftist governments are forced to compete for resources in the context of global capitalism.

## THE MOVEMENT COUNCIL

WE BEGAN BY LISTENING. Hearing one another through sound-bites sent across the seas. Listening until our ears bled and our hearts broke. Listening until we cried at the similarities. And then again, until we rejoiced over the same.

We listened to Kopana in the Congo weep over the loss of his son. Murdered for the diamonds he mined. The same ones that likely now sparkled on someone's finger. We listened to Sheetal in Bangladesh wail over the loss of her daughter. Crushed by the collapse of the factory where she made sneakers. The same ones that likely now sparkled on someone's feet.

We heard stories of water setting on fire in Kentucky. Of toxic sludge oozing out of nuclear sites in Japan. Of pigs being born with 2 heads. Of babies being born with no hands. Of ten-story waves and bottomless graves. Of forests being burnt to the floor.

Stories of people being beaten for who they love. Beaten for who they worship. Beaten for how they looked. Beaten for nothing at all. By the Klan, by their lovers, by police, by their brothers.

We listened to people thrown off of their land, thrown off of planes, thrown into jails, thrown into war, thrown damn near to the wolves. To people who weren't sure who to fight. To people who'd fought back and won. To people who'd fought back and lost. To people who'd simply grown tired.

We held them close, and then we decided to rebel.

WE RESEARCHED AND MAPPED, to know the shape of our enemies. Sketching a complicated spider web of connections. Like some abstract masterpiece of a madman. Or the crisscrossing lines in each of our palms. It could have been unfurled from one corner of the globe to another. Instead we put it all online. Updating in real time at everyone's fingertips. Exposing linkages between targets. Between the big shot profiteers of exploitation and the small time go betweens. Thick black lines drawn between board chairs and landlords, politicians and banks.



There's something powerful about visualizing venom moving through veins. Pinpointing where to strangle the source.

From there they emerged. Large shadowy figures became crystal clear. Real people, in flesh and blood, with the deepest pockets. Some armed with cruel intentions. Others just complicit. We spoke their names, loudly and clearly, and inducted them into the hall of shame. The machines they built to be dismantled by any means.

WE TORE DOWN THE WALLS. Brick by brick and plank by plank. Watched them come crashing to the ground, and stepped cautiously to avoid rusty nails.

We had begun to suffocate.

Some of the walls we built on our own, by force or by will or by habit. Others they built for us, with meticulous and masterful plans. Regardless, the walls made us weaker. Dividing us, as they're meant to.

*They* settled in between people. Hardening difference. So that humanity came after every other part of our identities.

*They* loomed large between nations. First drawn with haste and greed to facilitate conquest. Lingering to turn us into aliens, illegals and outlaws. We waited desperately at borders with fingers braided and breathe bated. For them to stamp us and declare that we were welcome. We played by the rules set before us, and stayed within the lines.

*They* stood firm between battles. Convincing us that we were on our own. Pushing us so far as to compete with one another. For the same ever-vanishing pot of money. For the same five minutes of shine. For the same hearts and minds.

But the ones who hurt us straddled the walls. Because with money all rules became merely suggestions. All difference dissolved into dollars. Or Yen, or Euros or Rupees or Rand.

So we brought the walls tumbling down, letting in the light and seeing one another for the first time.  
Standing in the immensity of our power.

WE FILLED THE POT, and are no longer for sale. Many of us had tried describing our goals in clear and achievable numbers. Wordsmithing our work to sound powerful but not too political. Diluting our dreams into precise action plans we had no desire to follow. Rubbing elbows with the very people we'd prefer to punch in the face. All for a tiny sum. Bound to beg again.

After following the money, we decided to break the rules, just like everyone else. To break the chain of reliance on the very system that swelled from our blood sweat and tears.

We affirmed that redistribution is not radical. It is only just.

Some of us paid no taxes. Some of us formed cooperatives and brought them up to scale, controlling the flow of light to our homes, controlling the milk that strengthened our bones. Some of us lived in socialist economies that nationalized the sugar. Some of us built robots that didn't steal our jobs. Some of us robbed banks. And money flowed into the pot. And then flowed out.

“From each according to [her] ability, to each according to [her] needs.”<sup>80</sup>

THE BALLOT BOX WAS NOT FOR US. Boxes in general were unappealing, and this was no different. Some of us hailed from the oldest and wisest democracies. Many truly believed that that was enough. That the voices of people would trickle up.

But in Alabama, Tyrone couldn't vote without ID. In Oaxaca, Ximena couldn't scrape up the money. In Paris, Sylvie had to choose between a bigot or banker. In Cairo, Hussein was scared he'd be shot.

Across the globe politicians of all stripes awkwardly danced, strings tugging at hands and knees. Unnaturally bending. Yielding to the money in whichever way that it came.

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<sup>80</sup> Marx, Karl, Daniel De Leon, and Did Marx. *The Gotha Program*. National Executive Committee, Socialist Labor Party, 1922.

Democracy had been captured. Broken and battered. Yet paraded around as if everything were ok.

So we built it anew, from the bottom up. A rotating council of the global grassroots, our own governance. We did it for ourselves. Erecting freedom schools in coconut groves and empty lots, teaching true histories and unraveling mysteries of how we got here. Doctors and nurses too joined the ranks of the borderless, caring for the sick and tired on the frontlines. No insurance necessary. We had teams of counselors, no cops.

USUALLY, men were the ones to speak first. To be trusted to know what was best. Especially young rich white men, suited and booted, with a predilection for lovely young women and a holy book tucked under one arm. Especially on the Right, but also on the Left and all the nooks and crannies in between.

In our council, women of color are the majority. They take the lead in dismantling the damsel for the badass protagonist, confronting her own distress. Honoring the legacy of the women who have come before us, and the future of the ones we'll create.

In our digging we found capitalism dwelling at the root. A poisonous seed, but things were not so simple. We were not just poor. Not just women. Not the same. We carried our histories with us, and allowed room for them to breathe. Of imperial soldiers who'd sailed through our waters and ravaged our daughters. Of barbaric caste affliction. Of drone dropped bombs and Jim Crow's younger brother.

We embrace our differences but walk toward the vision that we share.

WE ARE NOT SYMBOLIC. Our hearts are lifted when someone across the planet holds a sign that speaks to our struggle. Photographs of fists raised in defiance. Stern faces of support. 5,000 likes on Facebook. But we know it's enough. And neither is a march.

We do not walk where they tell us to walk. Leave when they tell us to leave. We do not need permission.

Once we've drawn our targets, in thick red strokes, we strike with all the strength we can muster. Stopping capital in its tracks. Militating when necessary. We seize land. We seize water. No longer willing to be slaughtered.

If capital can globalize with force, then so can we.

**WE GROW STRONGER EVERY DAY.** Just this morning, we had three new recruits.

## **PART II: WORKSHOPS**

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### **General**

1. How are Jaylyn, Camila and Devika's experiences connected or similar?
2. What are the differences in the ways that they experience globalization? Why is this important?
3. How do their identities (class, race, sexuality, gender, caste etc.) affect their experience and their process of politicization?
4. What do these stories tell us about how we think about modernity, growth and the future?
5. How can we challenge these ideas and put forth an alternative vision?

### **Jaylyn**

1. What is the school to prison pipeline?
2. Why do you think the author never explains why Amir ended up in jail?
3. What is the significance of race in the story?
4. How does the school to prison pipeline change the nature of our cities and communities?
5. Why are cities investing in prisons and not schools?
6. What does Jaylyn mean by the word crumbs?

### **Camila**

1. What does La Junta represent?
2. How does being in a colonial or post-colonial context, affect how we think about modernity and the future?
3. What is different between what Camila hears at the campamento and what she learns at the agroecology farm?
4. Why is Camila so frustrated at the end of the story?
5. How can we bring together alternative building and resistance work?

### **Devika**

1. What is the caste system, and how does it compare to class and race?
2. Why do you think the story begins in a mall?
3. Why does Devika have so much conflict with her mother?
4. Why doesn't the Communist Party directly oppose the seizure of Devika's land?
5. Devika works in a factory, what does that tell us about globalization?
6. How do we make sure that we are working to address class and identity politics together in our fight for social justice?

### **The Movement Council**

1. Who is 'we'?
2. What issues in the other stories does this one address?
3. How do we get from where we are today, to what is described in this chapter?
4. How would transnational social movements change our cities? Our states?

## **WORKSHOP 1**

### **CONTESTED SPACES**

*\*Adapted from Youth United for Change Youth Organizing Curriculum*

#### **Purpose:**

This workshop aims to challenge participants to think about the contested spaces in which we live our lives and who our communities are designed to serve. The goal is to build an understanding that there are competing agendas at play and that communities do not just exist but are intentionally designed, in many cases to oppress and exploit. Through a consideration of the characters in the stories above, participants should think about the possible extreme case scenario if capital is left unchallenged, as well as the possible alternatives that we might build instead. Participants must have read the stories to be able to fully engage.

#### **Materials:**

Markers

Blank butcher paper

Written up guiding questions

#### **Exercise:**

1. Divide participants into 6 small groups and give each group 1 piece of butcher block paper and markers. (If the group is smaller use 3 small groups and assign one group the two conflicting agendas, for example Jaylyn and Prison CEO).
2. Explain that each group will be responsible for designing some type of “ideal community” based on the needs of their assigned roles. For instance, one group might focus on designing a school that best meets the needs for Jaylyn (ie. ending the school to prison pipeline) while another group might focus on a community design that best meets the needs of Laxmi Cottons (securing easy land and labor resources).
3. Assign roles to each group:
  - Jaylyn (considering school and surrounding community)
  - Prison CEO (considering school and surrounding community)
  - Camila
  - Monsanto
  - Devika
  - Laxmi Cottons
4. Encourage each group to read over the guiding questions posted on the wall and discuss them together. These questions are meant to help them get a sense of their goals, but groups should not feel limited by them. Explain that not all questions will be applicable to everyone.

### **Guiding Questions** (*write on butcher paper*)

- What is your number one priority or goal?
  - Do you want your community members/students/workers to be well educated?
  - How should your community members/students/workers act towards authority figures, peers, and subordinates?
  - What kind of security, if any, should your school have? Will your school have police officers, metal detectors, bars on the windows, etc...?
  - If you build your ideal community, what will be the larger ripple effects on the surrounding neighborhood, community, region, etc?
  - What things should your community members/students/workers be used to? How will you make them used to those things?
  - How do you want your community members/students/workers to act? Do you want them to be friends with each other?
  - Are you concerned about your community members/students/workers' health?
  - Where do you want your community members to work?
  - What do you want your community members to own?
  - What should your community or school look like? Is it new or old? Are there trees? Is it well-kept or run-down?
5. GET STARTED! Based on the discussion of their goals in the previous step, the group must now design their communities to meet those goals. They should be ready to explain their rationale. For instance, if GEO Group has a goal of increasing dropout rates, they might draw tons of police in schools. Groups should each describe or represent at least 10 important characteristics of their community on butcher block. Encourage participants to draw as much as possible.
6. After they complete their designs, have each group post their papers up on the wall. Invite groups to share out their work together with the competing agenda from the same story. For instance the Devika group and Laxmi Cottons group should post their papers side by side and present right after each other.
7. After each pair of groups presents tell them to leave their roles behind and come back to the big group as themselves. Engage them in the following discussion questions.

### **Discussion Questions** (*write on butcher paper*)

1. What are the main differences between the capital communities (GEO, Monsanto and Laxmi Cottons) and the people communities (Jaylyn, Camila, Devika)?
2. Which one of these communities would you want to be a part of? Why?
3. Which one of these (or which aspects) most resembles your current community?
4. What's the role of ownership in these cases?
5. Why are these spaces contested? Who has the power to shape them?
6. What are our communities preparing us for?
7. What can we do to improve our communities? How do we change the power relationship?



## WORKSHOP 2

### BREAKING BOUNDARIES

#### **Purpose:**

This workshop aims to challenge participants to consider the fluidity of capital, and the urgency of transnational and cross-sector organizing. Participants should understand that, in the context of globalization, the ruling elite does not play by the same rules or operate within the same boundaries as the rest of world. It is time that we abandoned the boundaries as well.

#### **Materials:**

3 Scenario descriptions

Fake money

Written up discussion questions

#### **Exercise:**

1. Divide participants into 3 groups, one for each of the first 3 stories.
2. Within each group assign the following roles:

**Group 1-** Decision maker (1 person); GEO Group (1 person); Jaylyn (2-3 people)

**Group 2-** Decision maker (1 person); Monsanto (1 person); Camila (2-3 people)

**Group 3-** Decision maker (1 person); Laxmi Cottons (1 person); Devika (2-3 people)

*\*For GEO Group and Monsanto provide written or verbal profiles of the corporations and their industries of private prison and industrial agriculture respectively*

3. Explain that in each group capital has a desired outcome and community has a desired outcome. Distribute scenario cards and prompt participants to read them aloud in their small groups.

**Group 1-** The GEO Group is hoping to build a new massive prison, but they need the land to do so. If the decision maker awards them the land, they will make a profit of \$2,000 per year.

Jaylyn wants her school to stay open. If the decision maker awards her this, she has a higher likelihood of staying in school and maintaining her community support network.

**Group 2-** Monsanto is hoping to expand their seed experimentation on the island, but they need the land to do so. If the decision maker awards them the land, they will make a profit of \$700 per year.

Camila wants a small plot of land to develop a community farm. If the decision maker awards her this, she can help provide food for her community and teach people about agroecology and food sovereignty.

**Group 3-** Laxmi Cottons is hoping to build a new factory complex, but they need the land to do so. If the decision maker awards them the land, they will make a profit of \$1000 per year.

Devika wants to stay in her home. If the decision maker awards her this, she has a higher likelihood of meeting her basic human needs and surviving.

4. Explain that the decision maker has the power to choose to award the desired outcome to community or capital, or none at all. He/she can be convinced through one of two ways: *people power* or *financial power*. In each group it will take the following to convince them:

**Group 1-** 5 people or \$300

**Group 2-** 5 people or \$200

**Group 3-** 5 people or \$175

5. Distribute \$1 to each community member and \$95 to each capital representative.
6. Allow time for each of the groups to try to persuade and convince their decision maker.
  - \*Go around and remind the decision makers that they must stick to their metrics of 5 people or \$100.*
7. Say, “We recognize that some of you are having trouble advancing your agenda. Capital representatives (GEO, Monsanto and Laxmi Cottons) please come together in this corner and take some time to discuss.”
  - \* DO NOT encourage community members to walk around, but if they take it upon themselves to do so, do not stop them.*
  - \*Allow capital representatives to discuss for a few minutes. If they do not get there on their own, privately encourage them to pool their resources to invest in Laxmi Cotton’s factory and split profits. They cannot afford to invest in the Prison at this time, and profit is substantially higher in from the factory than Monsanto’s seed experimentation. With the profits they make from the factory, they can join together to move on to the next frontier for investment next year. From one year’s profit they would also have enough to invest on their own in the next year.*
8. Invite capital representatives back to their original groups. Open the floor for people to present new cases to the decision maker. The decision maker in Devika’s community, after receiving the pooled funds bends to Laxmi Cottons demands. Laxmi Cottons celebrates and walks over to share profits with both other representatives.
9. Bring the large group back together and discuss the following questions.

**Discussion Questions** (*write on butcher paper*)

1. What was the primary motivation of the capital representatives? What about the community members?

2. Who are the decision makers in our communities? It is the government?
3. Who is on the defense and who is on the offense?
4. Was there any way that community could have won in each of these cases?
5. Why didn't the community members from Devika's story talk to those from Camila's or Jaylyn's? If they were waiting for an invite for the facilitator, why?
6. How does this reflect how the capitalist class operates today?
7. What does this demonstrate about the challenge for social justice movements?

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