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# A BLADE OF GRASS

## Governance Reimagined

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A magazine about art and social engagement

Issue 4 — Spring 2020



## A BLADE OF GRASS MAGAZINE

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## A BLADE OF GRASS

# Other Ways to Govern

By Issue Guest Editor Laura Raicovich

When I joined my high school environmental club in the early 1990s, we made buttons that said “Think Globally. Act Locally.” As corny as it sounds, this concise directive is one that I have been trying to live by ever since. Or at least, I’ve been attempting to figure out what it means to live in such a state, with my mind and my heart in both of these registers. In the midst of a global pandemic, this formulation seems at once imperative and an act of care.

Addressing the question of how to live is one way to reimagine the rules we create to govern human activity, whether they be collective, autonomous, democratic, anarcho-syndicalist, or somewhere in-between the ragged edges of these and many other possible ideological directions. Even in the face of COVID-19, the rise of xenophobic nationalisms, state violence against dissent, and the climate-driven realities of potential human extinction, there are infinite imaginings of other ways for life and its governance to manifest. Consider artists’ experiments in this most practical aspect of society. What governance can do, at what scale, and for and by whom, is at the core of asking, “How do we live?”

In this issue of A Blade of Grass’ biannual magazine, artists from across a diversity of geographies take on how we might live otherwise, how we might rethink governance. From Latin America’s La Plata River Basin, the ancestral Maskoke lands, and Barcelona, to Puerto Rico, New York City, Philadelphia, and the in-between of state-lessness, artists share their thinking and projects that perform a particular role: to broaden the capacity of the collective imagination and reinvent governance beyond the stale and undemocratic functions we see enacted in state-houses and capitals across the globe. The through-thread that emerges

from the texts that follow, which has also come into vividly high relief as the cracks in governance reveal themselves in a moment of public health crisis, is that the pain and violence of the failures of such governance can also create much-needed space for other ways of being and doing.

*Casa Río* founder Alejandro Meitin, interviewed by Raquel de Anda, relays the work of a multidisciplinary group of artists, biologists, lawyers, and computer scientists, among others, who are working in a small town in Argentina on researching the ecologically essential La Plata River Basin. The central idea is to use the logics of the wetlands themselves as a model for their own governance, which crosses many national borders from Argentina to Bolivia, Paraguay, and Brazil. Meitin says, “The vision of governance that we speak of is ... the construction of a political muscle that is developed from a territorial perspective and what we define as the vocation of place.”

Marcus Briggs-Cloud tells the unfolding story of a quest to re-create the nearly-lost Indigenous language of the Maskoke whose ancestral lands are what is colonially named Alabama and Georgia. He describes the organization of an eco-village called Ekvn-Yefolecv [ee-gun yee-full-lee-juh], a phrase in Maskoke with the double meaning of “Returning to the Earth” and “Returning to our homelands.” Briggs-Cloud’s story so centrally positions the question of ‘How do we live?’ that Ekvn-Yefolecv seeks to create the specific living conditions that make the language possible. He writes, “In order to see a real reversal of language loss, we have to altogether change the way we live.”

Artist Jorge Díaz Ortiz tells of AgitArte, a collective project based in Puerto Rico that has created cooperative, self-governing, mutual-aid structures in the face of natural disasters and government corruption. He speaks of the necessity of cultural and solidarity work when government structures fail, as they did in Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane María and the multiple earthquakes last fall. He says, “The fissures created after catastrophes in the management of emergencies by the state, can create conditions for breaks in the hegemony of our colonial state and permit for new structures of governance and power.” The work of these collective efforts joining together was made possible, therefore, by the very conditions of crisis.

Laura Hanna and Thomas Gokey, two founders of the Debt Collective, discuss how debt relief, particularly student debt relief, traveled from the assemblies of Occupy Wall Street to the strategic debt purchasing and cancellation of Strike Debt and the Rolling Jubilee, and now into national political agendas as they have been articulated by both Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. Hanna suggests that the abolition of debt not only creates an economic impact, but also “end[s] a systemic harm rather than simply cancelling out an action,” which, importantly, is a reparative effort to address the emotional and psychological impacts of long-term debt.

Miguel Robles-Durán interviews Gala Pin and Laia Forné, two expansive thinkers and activists who joined the En Comú Podem government in Barcelona, and have firsthand experience of attempting a reinvention of public administration from the inside. Pin and Forné share some of their work, including their participation in a new transnational governance project initiated with Robles-Durán, renowned Marxist economic geographer David Harvey, and a cohort of individuals from around the globe (including me) to facilitate bottom-up, grassroots initiatives in urban zones.

Artist Li Sumpter shouts out a cross-section of projects that connect art, technology, and Afrofuturism as methods to revolutionize storytelling towards social transformation. Her examples range from The Colored Girls Museum in Philadelphia, which stakes out space for the stories of Black and Brown women and girls, to Wangechi Mutu’s groundbreaking bronze sculptures installed on the façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the fall of 2019.

Dutch artist Jonas Staal’s writings from 2014 “propose a necessary art of the stateless state—an art not subject to prehistoric cultural and political structures, but an art that is a driving, imaginative force redefining the space and practice of the commons.” Here he describes his work with assemblies of stateless peoples and those considered “terrorists” (who are therefore denied state affiliation), which led to his work with the Rojava Revolution, among other projects. It is in this text that Staal begins to articulate a form of propaganda art that is centered on radical mutual liberation.

From the physical and metaphorical territories explored in the articles that follow, a common thread is the space created by the eroding credibility of state governance. Artists are responding by occupying this gap and reimagining governance in radical, equity-based ways. There is much to learn from these culturally grounded, transdisciplinary efforts. As Staal writes, “Democracy may well have been made possible by state structures, but in order to shape its core principles of egalitarianism—the equal distribution of power and knowledge—we must liberate it from the state, thus disentangling its power monopolies and oligarchies from the capitalist doctrine.” Whether ignoring the state, refusing it, undermining it, or transforming it from the inside, there is no doubt that reevaluating and reinventing the way we live and how we govern ourselves constitutes a contemporary urgency, and art is mapping the potential.

## Contributors

RAQUEL DE ANDA is a curator, producer, and cultural organizer based in Brooklyn, NY. Born and raised on the U.S.-Mexico border, much of her work approaches themes of duality, connection, separation, inclusion, and the intersection of migrant rights with climate justice.

MARCUS BRIGGS-CLOUD (Maskoke) is a language revitalizer, scholar, and musician. He is co-director of Ekvn-Yefolecv, an Indigenous ecovillage community in Weogufka, Alabama comprised of Maskoke persons who have returned to their ancestral homelands to practice linguistic, cultural, and ecological sustainability. He is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and a doctoral candidate in interdisciplinary ecology at the University of Florida where his work intersects liberation theology, linguistics, ecology, race, and gender identity. He received two Native American Music award nominations for his Maskoke hymn album *Pum Vcuvke Vrakkuecety* (To Honor Our Elders) and served as composer and choir director for the liturgical canonization of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha by Pope Benedict XVI. He is partnered to Tawna Little (Maskoke) and they have two children, Nokos-Afvnoke and Hemokke, with whom Marcus enjoys speaking exclusively in the Maskoke language.

LAIA FORNÉ is an urban sociologist specializing in urban planning, democracy, and commons, and has served as an advisor for public administrations, including the Housing Department of Catalonia’s government and the Area for Citizen Participation of the Barcelona City Council.

DEBORAH FISHER is a creative leader working to expand the roles artists, creativity, and culture play in civic life. She is the founding Executive Director of A Blade of Grass. Fisher has served as an art, strategy, and philanthropy advisor to Shelley and Donald Rubin, and has worked in many capacities at the intersection of art and civic life in New York City, including as a studio manager at Socrates Sculpture Park, and as a curriculum developer for the Brooklyn

Center for the Urban Environment. Her approach to leadership is deeply informed by her artistic training and experience making public art.

THOMAS GOKEY is a visual artist and an organizer with the Debt Collective.

LAURA HANNA is a filmmaker, media activist, and organizer. She helped launch Strike Debt’s Rolling Jubilee initiative, produced The People’s Bailout Telethon at Le Poisson Rouge, and co-founded the Debt Collective, an economic justice organization that advocates for the rights of debtors.

KATHRYN MCKINNEY is an arts administrator and communications strategist committed to promoting the influence of artists upon global culture. She earned a BA in Art History from San Francisco State University and continues her education at Baruch College’s Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, pursuing an MA in Arts Administration. She has consulted for artist-led nonprofits and social justice organizations in New York and worked with clients and in-house for international art businesses and institutions. Her writing has been published in *San Francisco Art Quarterly* and *Art Practical*.

ALEJANDRO MEITIN is an artist, lawyer, social innovator, and founder of the art collective *Ala Plástica* (1991–2016) based in the city of La Plata, Argentina. More recently, he founded *Casa Río* Power to do Lab, collaborating with youth, farmers, artists, activists, architects, landscape architects, local authorities, and pollution control experts to create proposals regarding rivers and water resources.

JORGE DÍAZ ORTIZ co-founded AgitArte in 1997 and is an editor of the book *When We Fight, We Win!* He is a puppeteer, popular educator, and bicultural organizer with over 25 years of experience. He is deeply committed to working class struggles against oppressive systems, namely colonialism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. Jorge is also a founding member of *Papel Machete*, a collective of radical artists and street

theater/puppetry workers dedicated to education, agitation, and solidarity work in 21st century Puerto Rico and its diaspora. He received his BA in Mass Communication from Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts. Jorge strives to be a rigorous, organic intellectual and is based in his hometown of Santurce, Puerto Rico. He and Papel Machete are 2020 A Blade of Grass Fellows for Socially Engaged Art.

GALA PIN is a former councilor in the first legislature of Barcelona en Comú where she was in charge of citizen participation and the district of Ciutat Vella. She has participated in various struggles for the right to the city, is a defender of rights and freedom in the digital era, and participated in active promotion of 15M in the Spanish State.

LAURA RAICOVICH is a writer, curator, and art worker who is focused on the intersections of art and life. She is currently the Interim Director of the Leslie Lohman Museum and is writing a book about museums, cultural institutions, and the myth of neutrality (Verso, 2021). In 2019, she was a Rockefeller Foundation Fellow at the Bellagio Center and recipient of the inaugural Emily H. Tremaine Journalism Fellowship for Curators at *Hyperallergic*. She formerly served as President and Executive Director of the Queens Museum where she oversaw a vital commons for art, ideas, and social engagement. Raicovich also inaugurated Creative Time's Global Initiatives, launching the artist-driven media project, Creative Time Reports, and directing the Creative Time Summit, an annual art and social justice conference. She worked for a decade at Dia Art Foundation and has held positions at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Public Art Fund, and New York City's Department of Parks and Recreation. She also lectures and organizes programs and projects internationally.

MIGUEL ROBLES-DURÁN is a proponent of the idea of the right to the city and co-founder of Cohabitation Strategies, a nonprofit cooperative for socio-spatial development. He is an Associate Professor of Urbanism at The New School-Parsons School of Design in New York City.

JONAS STAAL is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy. He is the founder of the artistic and political organization New World Summit (2012–ongoing) and the campaign New Unions (2016–ongoing). Recent exhibition-projects include *Art of the Stateless State* (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2015), *After Europe* (State of Concept, Athens, 2016), *The Scottish-European Parliament* (CCA, Glasgow, 2018) and *Museum as Parliament* (with the Democratic Federation of North Syria, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2018-ongoing). His projects have been exhibited widely at venues such as the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and Moderna Museet in Stockholm, as well as the 7th Berlin Biennial (2012), the 31st São Paulo Biennale (2014), The Oslo Architecture Triennale (2016), and the Warsaw Biennale (2019). His most recent book is *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (The MIT Press, 2019). Staal completed his PhD research on propaganda art at the PhDArts program of Leiden University, the Netherlands.

LI SUMPTER, PhD is a scholar and multidisciplinary artist who applies worldbuilding strategies and mythic design toward building better, more resilient communities of the future. Her work explores the anatomy and aesthetics of apocalypse focusing on feminine archetypes in End Time and Afrofuturist narratives. Li's collaborative design initiatives engage the art of survival and sustainability through diverse ecologies and creative problem-solving. Li recently completed artist and writer residencies with Haverford College's Urban Ecology Arts Exchange (2018), Leeway x NextFab Art and Technology Residency (2019) and SWIM PONY's Trail Off land-based project (2019/2020). She's a three time recipient of the Leeway Art and Change Grant and was awarded support from Sundance, Knight, and Puffin Foundations for her transmedia project *Graffiti in the Grass*. Li is also an educator and eco-arts activist working through MythMedia Studios, the Escape Artist Initiative, and various arts and community-based organizations in Philly and across the country.

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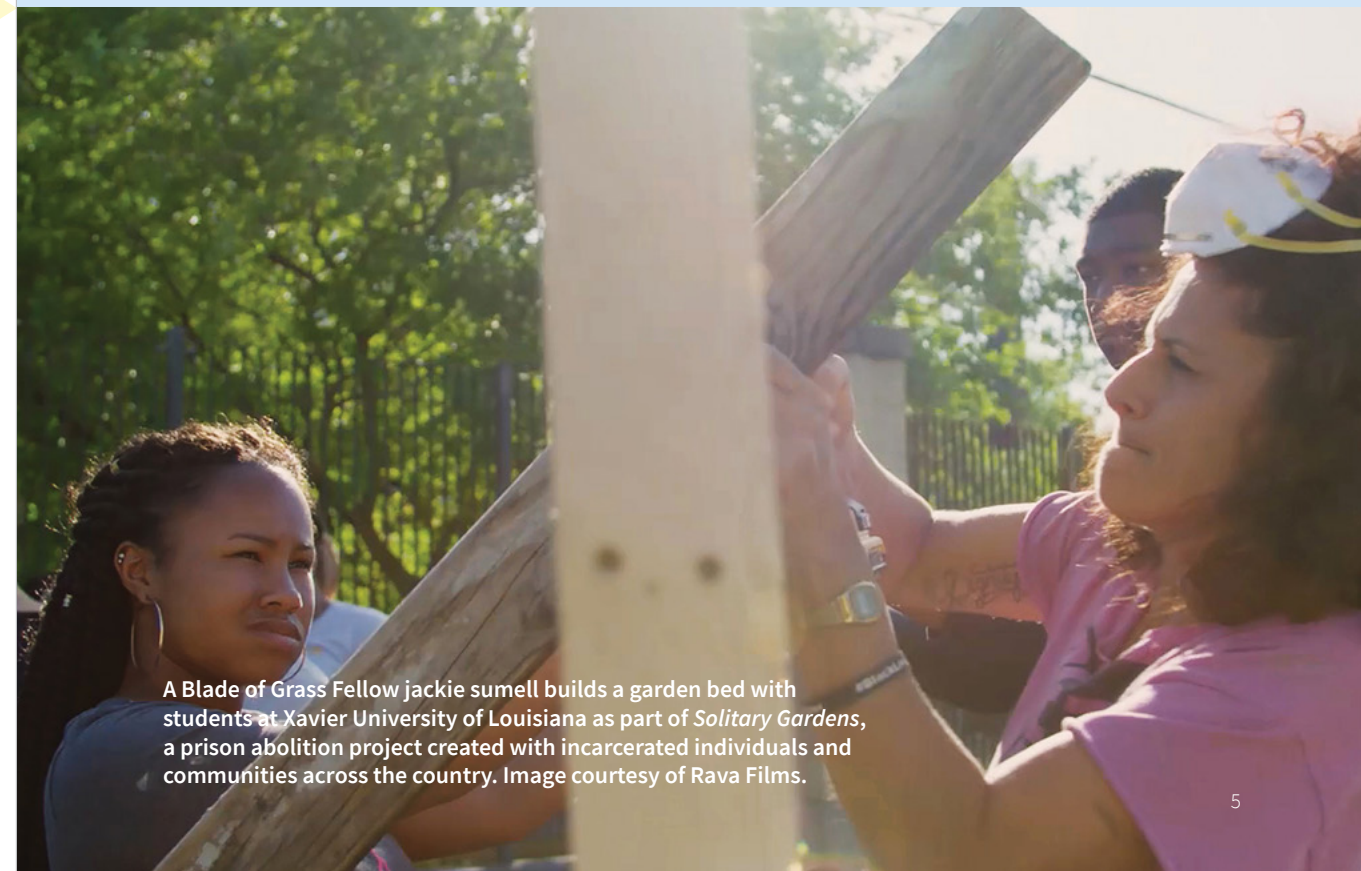
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A Blade of Grass Fellow Jackie Sumell builds a garden bed with students at Xavier University of Louisiana as part of *Solitary Gardens*, a prison abolition project created with incarcerated individuals and communities across the country. Image courtesy of Rava Films.

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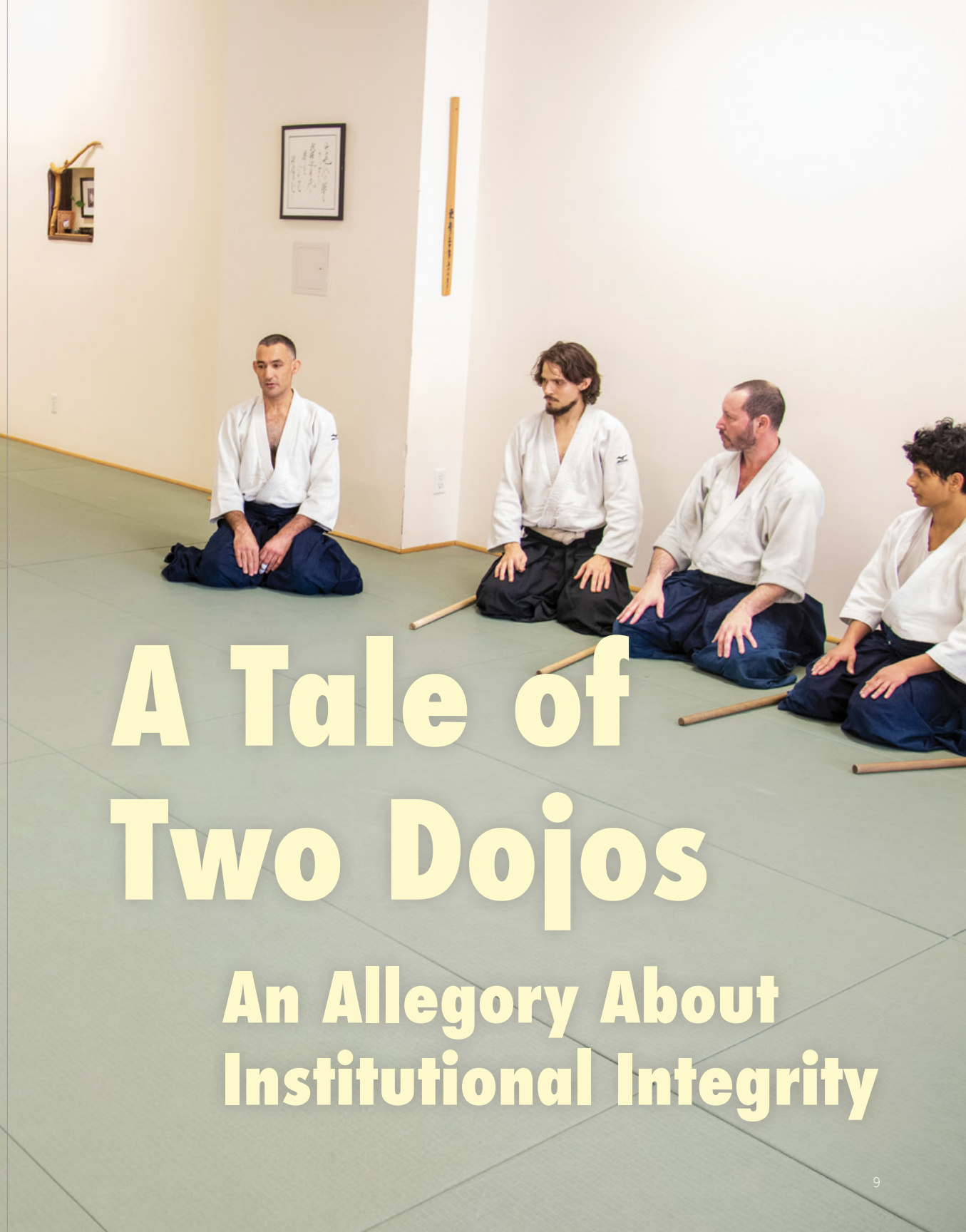
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Deborah Fisher  
Executive Director  
A Blade of Grass

Aikido students gather in a circle to thank one another for training at the end of each class. Photo by Lorenzo Tijerina.



# A Tale of Two Dojos

An Allegory About Institutional Integrity

WE'RE LIVING IN A UNIQUE MOMENT, there are so many grand stories of institutional disillusionment and decay in the air. This is showing up in the arts as some museum boards becoming the target of activism, and an escalation of the usual scarcity mindset that plagues art institutions—smaller institutions getting more desperate and closing, and the few better-resourced institutions expanding into mega-institutions that increasingly serve wealth, not people. I think we're all learning something really basic about how to express and wield power with integrity. And if you're like me, it's possible that all this learning about institutional power might be showing up in your personal life, your hobbies or relationships, in ways that mirror these larger institutional lessons in helpful ways.

Institutions are just people working together toward a shared goal. Institutional relationships, at every level, are about reconciling collective ideals and stories to personal identity and action. Right now, the ideals and stories do not match the actions of individuals—particularly those of us who have power. This discrepancy makes our institutions feel hollow and shaky. But instead of asking how to build an institution that is solid, I want to ask something more like “what types of institutional *practice* have integrity?” This is important because we're learning that institutional forms have no inherent power. It's our actions within and in the name of these forms that matters.

When I'm not running A Blade of Grass, I am a pretty serious student of aikido, a Japanese martial art. Through regular aikido practice, anybody can learn to conduct themselves with more power, but also more awareness of that power and its effect on others. Aikido happens in an “art world” of sorts. I train in a dojo, a hierarchical institutional structure, and most dojos plug into a network of larger

federations or associations. These federations add legitimacy and articulate things like the lineage or history of the art, and what you have to do to rise in rank. They also introduce a lot of drama and power struggle to a practice that is incredibly idealistic—the goal of aikido is nothing less than to create total harmony.

Perhaps it makes a lot of sense that in this time, when we've all been in institutional shock about so many things, I've been remaking my relationship to aikido at the institutional level. Until recently, I trained at this dojo that is internationally famous. My old sensei studied directly with the founder and came to New York in the 1960's upon the founder's death to continue spreading aikido. Ultimately he created a national federation of aikido dojos all over the United States that keeps a direct relationship to the founder's dojo in Tokyo. I certainly enjoyed the reach and reputation of my old sensei during the decade I was a member of his dojo. When I said I was from this dojo, people were impressed. This made me more confident, like more of a force on the mat. Being a member of this dojo made me feel like a badass! Unfortunately, this badass feeling did little to sustain and deepen my actual practice or make me feel welcome in my old dojo. I endured occasional, mild sexual harassment and didn't feel pushed or mentored—it was clear that I was good *for a woman* and therefore was not worth further investment. My training kind of stalled out, which is a bad sign—training is something you should ideally be deepening and letting transform you for the rest of your life. My old sensei was rarely there teaching. The dojo, technically a nonprofit, needed more and more money, but it wasn't clear why.<sup>1</sup> It's not just that the old dojo stopped living up to its myth or reputation. I started to feel like I was tolerating things in the dojo that I would never tolerate in any other part of my life.

1. Not suggesting foul play, just a level of opacity that I feel is inappropriate for any nonprofit



I think we're all learning something really basic about how to express and wield power with integrity.

An aikido student folds a *gi*, the uniform worn while training. Photo by Lorenzo Tijerina.

Ultimately, I left and joined a new dojo, and that was hard. Being disillusioned enough to leave was easy. I think profound disillusionment is the gift of this moment. But disentangling myself from my identity as a member, or the myth that I was already at the best dojo, took forever. This process of creating a new institutional relationship was an active process of reconciling my identity and actions to a new set of collective ideals and stories. For about a year I have been in an uncomfortable transition, a *bardo* period of sorts, in which the old institution has been dying inside me and the new institution has been slowly coming to life as I accept fundamental shifts, like being open to a new style. Or the fact that

in this new dojo, we train harder instead of calling ourselves badasses. Or getting used to a sensei who is more interested in developing each member than building and consolidating institutional authority.

I think this is a slow process because I didn't want to trust any institution after devoting myself to an institution that didn't have integrity. But it's interesting, and very much of this moment, that I got a lot of extra help with the part where the old institution had to die. After I sustained enough disillusionment to leave, a group of highly ranked women who train at dojos affiliated with my old sensei from all over the country circulated a very

It's a sacred space that positions martial arts training as a dangerous place for our egos and a safe space for our spirits.



Students of all ranks participate in the ritual of cleaning the dojo as a sign of mutual respect and responsibility towards one another and the institution. Photo by Sean MacNintch.

polite petition that was grounded in their love of aikido and concerns about its future. They asked for support of specific initiatives that would increase gender representation and equity, such as including a woman on the national technical committee. I signed it immediately, and I have to admit that it momentarily gave me hope that I could go back to my old life and quit this humbling and arduous transition process. But the petition was received as a personal attack: my old sensei didn't display good leadership and intimidated a bunch of people into removing their signatures. Some I considered friends in this old dojo became really tribal about protecting their leader instead of listening to their friends' and longtime training partners' reasonable concerns and productive suggestions about how to make aikido and the federation better. A friend of mine who had been training at this dojo for almost 40 years was banished, not just at my old dojo but at any affiliated dojo, just for signing and circulating the petition. Any lingering doubts I had about whether I belonged to the old dojo were effectively cauterized, and the half-in, half-out attitude I was bringing to the new dojo became easier for me to see.

The petition part of this story is all about right now because it's another example of epic institutional betrayal. What makes this a story also about the future is that the new dojo does three things to engender my trust, which I think are a real way forward for all of us, in any institutional context. The new dojo *is what it says it is*; it's operating with *sufficiently high stakes*; and the ideas it is built upon demand something of me—the dojo *doesn't work without my participation*. It's a sacred space that positions martial arts training as a dangerous place for our egos and a safe space for our spirits. You could see how such a statement would be an invitation to abuse, right? What makes it okay is not the form—all dojos are kingdoms, senseis can do whatever they want—but the way both my new sensei



and the membership choose to enact it on a daily basis. This consistent reconciliation of words to actions is the fundamental building block of any institutional practice, and it's hard because it requires the leader to empower others and notice when they are in the wrong. What matters in my new dojo is not the lineage or reputation of my sensei, it's the proposition he's offering to a membership. He is saying, "I will transform you by challenging your ego and nurturing your spirit," combined with a daily commitment to use his power in a way that makes that proposition reliably and demonstrably true.

One way he achieves this is by sharing some of his power. Even a leader with almost total authority, like a sensei or an employer, can make all kinds of decisions to share that power. There's a lot of listening. Everybody who trains is taken seriously. People are given important responsibilities, and are recognized for their achievements. Are decisions around wielding power 100% benevolent, or even accurate? No, that's impossible to achieve. But the decisions around the distribution of power are good enough to create an environment that I am starting to feel safe having my ego challenged in.

I do think that this approach to power, particularly in the autocratic world of martial arts, does a lot to create a vibrant, growing, young dojo that I would bend over backwards to support. We all signed up for this challenging proposition together—we're here

to be transformed. And we'll hold one another on that journey. If you're scared on the mat, or hurt, or crying in the dressing room because you were challenged too much, you can talk about it with Sensei, and count on the support of every single person around you. I've trained a long time and never been in a dojo like that. This is important because the larger aikido community is both aging and shrinking,<sup>2</sup> facing a relevance crisis that is similar to the one arts institutions are facing. And I can't help but notice that it might be because arts institutions also love to consolidate power

and cultural authority, and trade on things like lineage, reputation, and personal power that can't be reliably practiced by a community.

I don't end this essay knowing how to reform nonprofit boards in the arts or with a clear sense of what a post-democratic United States is going to look like. What I get is a clearer sense that we

can make strides toward the institutions we want by changing our behavior, rather than architecting alternatives to the institutions themselves. Our institutions feel hollow because for various reasons we are hollow in them. On one hand, this is pretty empowering! We always have the power to consider our own behavior and behave differently. On the other, investing in institutional relationships that are less hollow requires vulnerability and might mean letting go of some pretty powerful incentives. This helps me see the arts landscape differently. There are a lot

## Our institutions feel hollow because for various reasons we are hollow in them.

of institutions that have such a huge gap between what they say and what they do, or are operating with such low stakes for most people that I better understand why they're struggling, and I don't know if they have a way to grow. Even in whole sectors that feel like they are dying, I also see so much life. A rapidly growing institution like Laundromat Project isn't reinventing the form of the arts nonprofit. Rather, it's conducting its business with a much deeper and more consequential relationship to its communities, including demanding greater accountability from itself and as many of its partners as it can. It's not hollow because the people in it are not acting hollow. That deep sense of consequence, of being implicated in a project or journey that is larger than yourself, is threatening because we are so trained to avoid it. We certainly find it risky to create institutional experiences that have a deep sense of consequence. This might be particularly true in the arts, where a sense of low stakes or artificiality—the idea that it's just art—are instrumental to our work, and freedom from "reality" is often necessary for breakthroughs. But maybe the future lies in facing that problem. If we do, we can take incremental steps toward articulating what precisely it is that art and art institutions do that is truly of consequence, and then start earnestly enlisting, rather than appeasing, artwashing, or entertaining the folks who are already committed to helping us do the work.

2. There are a lot of statistics in this 2017 Aikido Journal article (<https://aikidojournal.com/2017/12/07/aikido-confronting-a-crisis/>), the most relevant is a student to instructor ratio of 1.5:1. Aikido teachers are teaching a lot of their peers and not a lot of new folks.



Astrology is a lot like art: it uses craft and ideas to make a coincidence meaningful. Planets don't cause events to unfold down here on Earth, nor are we making the planets move. Cause and effect explanations of astrology are silly! But there does seem to be a relationship between the planets and our lives that can be exploited to tell stories. Because this relationship isn't causal, the stories can be about forces beyond our control. We all live under the same sky, so astrological stories tend to be about what we share and how we are bound. And we were each born at a unique time and place that describes our personal relationship to this sky we share.

This issue is about governance, and our stories will focus on this too because there have been about two years of intense planetary action on the Cancer-Capricorn axis that are culminating this year. These two signs describe tensions that by now feel like the air we breathe: the tribe versus the institution; whether you're bound by blood or by laws; what you protect and heal on one hand, and are ambitiously building on the other. We certainly arrived in 2020 nurturing the groups we belong to, whether we're creating POC-centered spaces to heal systemic racism or consolidating power within the Republican party. And for all of us, supporting our tribes feels like a reaction to institutional betrayal and destruction.

The stars cannot say which side wins in this story, but we all seem to be working toward something of consequence. This year is momentous astrologically; 2020 starts with epic acts of creative destruction and ends with nothing less than the dawn of a new era. Pluto and Saturn conjoined in Capricorn on January 12, 2020. The planet of structure, rules, and authority lines up with the planet of creative destruction, truth-finding, and power struggle regularly, and this cycle tends to accurately predict institutional upheaval. To take one example, Martin Luther started his quest to put people in a direct relationship with god

that is unmediated by the Church beneath a Pluto-Saturn conjunction. And we'll end the year with the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction on December 21, 2020 in Aquarius. This is also a regular cycle, and Saturn is still all about rules and institutional authority. But Jupiter is the planet of abundance, luck, ideas, leadership, and potential, and Aquarius signifies what we can collectively imagine and innovate. There's hope! This moment could debut the new structures, institutions, and authorities that are destined to rise out of January's wreckage.

But what about now, in this long, anxious moment between destruction and rebirth? That's where we find ourselves, and we know the world doesn't just end on one day in January, and simply rise anew eleven months later without anybody putting in the effort to ensure it's a world we actually want. Here in the U.S., the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction is just as likely to describe an authoritarian regime as it is to coincide with the end of the electoral college. *What needs tending in this critical regeneration phase?* The astrology of spring and summer 2020 is telling us that the focus will be on love and relationships, and that makes sense. We have *rightly* focused on protecting ourselves and healing our wounds as all the institutions crumbled around us. But even though we were right, that focus on protecting our in-group cannot help but create an out-group, and that carries destructive weight. Creating something new will require brave new relationships outside the tribe.

This May and June, Venus will be retrograde in Gemini, the sign that symbolizes transmitting information, establishing connection. We'll have a sustained opportunity to connect across difference, take emotional risks, and reconsider how we show up in relationships. While Gemini is a quick and easy sign, this period of review will not be straightforward! Venus will be in a conflict with Neptune, the planet of romance, intoxication, confusion, and addiction. This will be followed by another

standoff with Mars—the planet of anger, conflict, courage, and will. These conditions are perfect for texting old lovers, falling into complicated romances, and all sorts of other emotional risks—and the lessons are going to be about how we fail others and get hurt ourselves. None of us should expect to be treated exactly the way we want and deserve to be. But this could be the summer in which we learn just how resilient we are. This might be the key to building the world we want in 2021 and beyond.



# Your Sky

## Aries

You have been totally restructuring your career or public persona so that you can reclaim some power, and now the focus is going to shift to your relationship skills and how you're showing up day to day. You're going to face strong challenges from the deepest, most repressed parts of your psyche! But by taking an emotional risk, you're setting yourself up to gain friends, admirers, and lots of other connections.

## Taurus

You've been facing disillusionment and radical reshaping of your education or beliefs, and are now being asked to carefully review your resources and ensure your material comfort. Your friends might not understand this emphasis on loving yourself! But by giving yourself what you need, you're setting yourself up to make huge career strides in 2021 and beyond.

## Gemini

You might have been processing a serious loss, family financial issues, or repaying a karmic debt over the last couple of years. Set that heaviness aside and really focus on loving yourself or deeply considering your attractiveness to others. This might create confusion in your career or public life. But you'll be ready for a journey, educational course, or spiritual awakening in 2021 and beyond.

## Cancer

You have been hard at work claiming power and dealing with limitations in your committed relationships. Focus on loving the most hidden or secret parts of yourself this summer. If you can focus on loving the most inaccessible parts of you, you'll be walking into December ready to tap into shared resources and heal old wounds to build something new.

## Leo

You've had years of structural overhauls with employees, health, or work. Turn away from your desk and focus on loving your friends, acquaintances, and community more deeply. This may mean grieving losses or conflict around debts. But you'll be walking into December ready to reinvest in the long term partnerships that matter most to building your future.

## Virgo

You've blown up everything you thought you knew about your art or other creative practice, and are now ready to invest in truly loving your public persona or career. Your business or life partner might be overwhelmed or confused by this shift, but you'll be walking into December ready to roll up your sleeves and make an important body of work in 2021.

## Libra

Your family structures have been enduring an arduous teardown-and-rebuild process. You might need to get away from home and escape into a romantic journey or a deeply spiritual connection that shifts your beliefs about love. Your daily routine will suffer, but you'll be walking into December with new creative insight, a new child or better relationships with children.

## Scorpio

You've been rebuilding an aspect of your communication, relationship with siblings, or your neighborhood. This summer, you might connect with an ex or otherwise review a relationship with an eye toward repaying debts or processing loss. This might put you in conflict with another, wiser romance, or simply make it impossible to have a good time. But in this review process, you'll heal something that breathes new life into your family and foundations.

## Sagittarius

You've been doing a lot of hard work to reclaim financial power or improve your self worth, and now the focus shifts to revisiting and reviewing your long-term business and life partnerships. This could cause confusion or conflict in your home life, but ultimately these conflicts might result in better communication.

## Capricorn

You've been dismantling and rebuilding your look or your very sense of self. This summer, deeply consider loving yourself by creating compassionate habits, nourishing your health, or taking care of the things you need to do with greater ease. Not everybody's going to get this—communicating your needs will not be easy! But you'll be setting yourself up to approach your finances or self worth with more power.

## Aquarius

You've been hard at work confronting your shadows, perhaps dismantling deeply held beliefs that hold you back. This summer you'll find romance and fun, or maybe a relationship with a child, that starts off light but becomes a serious referendum on your sense of self-worth. Negotiating this conflict well might positively change who you think you are.

## Pisces

You've been navigating power plays that threaten your friend group or organizing work, and now the focus shifts to reviewing your relationships to family or parents. You might find you're the one bringing considerable drama or conflict to this! But if you can accept and own your role, you could powerfully assert transformative leadership over the darkest parts of your psyche in 2021 and beyond.

# Art of the Stateless State

Jonas Staal

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When I met Jonas Staal in 2013, his first iteration of the New World Summit had recently taken place. The summit brought together people from around the globe who were labelled terrorists by one state or another due to political beliefs, social and political affiliations, nomadic cultural conditions, or other unknown qualifying acts. Staal's idea was straightforward. The refusal of state acknowledgement created a special class of people whose embodied knowledge and methodologies could perhaps be productively shared if art could break down the barriers to their assembly in public institutions in countries that have blacklisted them. Importantly, such a gathering could yield the “imaginative force redefining the space and practice of the commons” so desperately missing from the state politics of the moment.

What follows is an excerpt from a “Field Report” that offers a view inside Staal's early thinking which has evolved into, among other initiatives, two particularly profound experiments. The first was a collaboration with the coalition of Kurdish, Arab, and Assyrian peoples that brought about the Rojava Revolution, which has inspiringly created an autonomous region in Northern Syria, centering women's rights, equity, and religious freedom. The second was a more traditional book project that contains a set of unconventional ideas titled *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (MIT 2019). Among the attendees of the first summit were representatives from the Kurdish Women's Movement. Their relationship with Staal subsequently deepened and led to an invitation in 2015 to design and build a public parliament building in Rojava that explicitly reflects the values of the Rojava Revolution. It was completed in 2018. Staal's book, parallel to many of the ideas embedded in the Rojava project, proposes the potential for propaganda art that is premised on mutual emancipation, rather than the consolidation of power into the hands of a few. The book grows from years of this work, including a desire to use art-driven assemblies to create “an independent network of references, histories, and symbols that define identity, even beyond what a territorially or legislatively defined state might ever be able to obtain” as a means of creating new transnational realities. The work of imagining possible alternative governance structures that would enable such transformation, as art and as politics, for Staal, is intrinsic to the thinking outlined below.

—Laura Raicovich

Previous: The inauguration of the People's Parliament of Rojava in Dêrik. Photo by Ruben Hamelink, courtesy of Jonas Staal.

## I. Christina Aguilera, Dinosaurs, and Capitalist Democracy's Mass Torture

On March 3, 2006, a leaked file documenting an interrogation at Guantánamo prison in Cuba was released via *Time* magazine's website. The log contained a detailed report on one and a half months of the torture of Saudi citizen Mohammed Mani Ahmed al-Kahtani, the suspected 20th hijacker from the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in September 2001.<sup>1</sup> Personally approved by Donald Rumsfeld, the United States' then Secretary of Defense, the methods used were known as “enhanced interrogation techniques,” and they included “extended sleep deprivation, forced standing (also known as stress positions), isolation, manipulation of heat and cold, noise bombardment, personal humiliation, and mock execution.”<sup>2</sup> The myth of the efficiency and acceptability of what had at the time been dubbed “torture lite” (sic) has since been discredited; less attention, however, has been given to the bizarre but systematic use of Western pop cultural output as means of torture.<sup>3</sup>

Guards at Guantánamo moved al-Kahtani between closed, darkened spaces; they deregulated his sleep patterns, disorienting him and making it impossible for him to know when to pray and in which direction. Then they blasted him with Christina Aguilera's 2002 hit “Dirrty.” Al-Kahtani was exposed to pinup girls and pornography, non-halal McDonald's food, and strobe lights. All these are ostensible products of a “liberated” Western culture, subverted in Guantánamo as tools of oppression.

On January 10, 2003, at 22:45, al-Kahtani's interrogator allowed him the rare opportunity to choose a topic to talk about. According to the log, the “[d]etainee wanted to talk about dinosaurs.” Al-Kahtani's response reaches back from a brutal present into a prehistory untarnished by such evidence of civilization as fast food, *Playboy*, and Christina Aguilera. This choice of topic was not naive but radical, reaching far beyond the oppressive iconographic realm of his confines at Guantánamo.

Yet the guards' log bypasses Al-Kahtani's escape from the terror of the present, noting

Fadile Yildirim (left) speaks on behalf of the Kurdish Women's Movement at the New World Summit – Berlin in 2012. Photo by Lidia Rossner, courtesy of Jonas Staal.



only the following: “Interrogator gave history of dinosaurs and talked about the meteor that wiped them out, and equated this event with nuclear war. Detainee expresses great ignorance about dinosaurs and space, topics that are taught in U.S. grade schools.”<sup>4</sup> The Guantánamo logic thus reduces veritable meaning—given here in the simile, “nuclear war poses a threat to humans like that which a meteor may have posed to the dinosaurs”—to a matter of “*true or false?*”

The leaked interrogation logs furthermore engage a disturbing understanding of the very culture from which their agents emerge: if the everyday décor of consumer society is a bona fide instrument of torture, according to Guantánamo logic, then surely it must be “true” that we are currently undergoing permanent, mass cultural torture as subjects of what Alain Badiou has referred to as “capitalist democracy.”

Although “democracy” is a single word, we may observe its use across the political spectrum, employed in the name of such radically different operations as the “war on terror” under which al-Kahtani was tortured, and the massive social movements to have crossed the globe in the 21st century since Spain’s 15 million *indignados* began to occupy southern Europe. What is needed, then, is a vocabulary that allows us to differentiate between the language of emancipation and that of repression.

## II. Lenin in Japan

Vladimir Lenin goes to Japan. To speak to the masses there, he must use a translator. When he comes to his fundamental critique of what he considers to be a “bourgeois democracy,” the translator becomes confused. At this moment, it is clear to Lenin that in Japanese the word “democracy” (*minshushugi*) has yet to be formulated. It is best translated as an “-ism” (*-shugi*): democratism.

Our task, as political artists, is to liberate our media from that servitude, to work toward genuine emancipation from the symbols that now legitimize torture and mass cultural oppression.

The inauguration of the People’s Parliament of Rojava in Dêrik. Photo by Ruben Hamelink, courtesy of Jonas Staal.



Researcher Jolle Demmers chairs a session with Callum Clayton-Dixon (Aboriginal Provisional Government, APG), Emory Douglas (Black Panther Party, United States), Ilena Saturay (National Democratic Movement of the Philippines), Richard Bell (artist, Aboriginal Tent Embassy), and Vivian Zihlerl (Frontier Imaginaries) during the 2016 New World Summit – Utrecht. Photo by Nieuwe Beelden Makers, courtesy of Jonas Staal.



Simon P. Sapioper (Government of West-Papua) speaks at the New World Summit - Utrecht. Photo by Nieuwe Beelden Makers, courtesy of Jonas Staal.

In recent years I have worked with political parties, nonparliamentary political organizations, and social movements focused on exploring what role art might play once it is resituated within an alternative political sphere, and how this political sphere might change once artists engage it. In my own practice, these endeavors have led to an artistic and political organization called the New World Summit. Since 2012, the New World Summit has developed a series of “alternative parliaments” worldwide, providing a forum for political and juridical representatives from organizations that have been excluded from democracy, listed as terrorists, banned from travel, and financially immobilized, with their assets frozen. The alternative parliaments of the New World Summit seek to situate art outside of what Sinclair described as its “extended prehistory” of political exclusion and oppression.

Subversion results from this translation; “democracy”—the term—is broken, then doubled up to produce another. Through what we might now label as a Deleuzian proposal, Lenin has spoken about what he knows best, in the language he knows the least—one in which the democratic had yet to be formulated in language, just as, elsewhere, it had yet to be put into actual practice.

Lenin adopts the term. In “Working-Class and Bourgeois Democracy” (1905), he writes of a “Russian bourgeois democratism,” reflective only of the interests “of the mass of tradesmen and manufacturers, chiefly medium and small, as well as (and this is particularly important) those of the mass of proprietors and petty proprietors among the peasantry.”<sup>5</sup> Today, it is this concept of democratism that philosopher Alain Badiou refers to as the “capitalo-parliamentarian order.”<sup>6</sup> And the “liberated” symbols of pop culture produced by the creative industry should be considered its art, and its preferred weapons of intellectual mass torture.

Upton Sinclair’s *Mammonart* (1924) seeks to analyze the history of art as a history of the ruling classes, beginning with a group of cavemen who discover that when they dedicate art to the honor of their leader, they are rewarded with privileges and protection. The history of art as something more than the narration of the dominant class has, according to Sinclair, yet to be written. On the extended prehistory of art, he wrote: “The artists of our time are like men hypnotized, repeating over and over a dreary formula of futility. And I say: Break this evil spell, young comrade; go out and meet the new dawning life, take your part in the battle, and put it into new art; do this service for a new public, which you yourself will make ... that your creative gift shall not be content to make artworks, but shall at the same time make a world; shall make new souls, moved by a new ideal of fellowship, a new impulse of love, and faith—and not merely hope, but determination.”<sup>7</sup>

Sinclair may well have subscribed to Andrea Fraser’s dictum: “We are all already serving.”

Our task, as political artists, is to liberate our media from that servitude, to work toward genuine emancipation from the symbols that now legitimize torture and mass cultural oppression. We are in need of an *art after democratism*.

### III. Toward an Art of the Stateless State

#### a. The New World Summit

The first act necessary to free art from its complicity in the mass cultural torture of democratism is to rearticulate the political context in which we want art to be operational. Making art in defense of *fundamental* democracy—as opposed to democratism—means demand-ing of art that it not only reflect a progressive, emancipatory politics, but also that it contribute to the shaping of its ideals. That is, the art that is required is not simply a product of politics, but a *political force in itself*.

These international gatherings have included organizations that are internationally considered to be state threats. In the European Union, a committee called the Clearing House was formed following the September 11, 2001 attacks to draw up the blacklist. The Clearing House meets biannually in Brussels, but there are no public proceedings or records of the body’s selection process. Even by its own standards, the committee in charge of deeming which organizations are to be placed “outside” the ideals of democratism is organized in a fundamentally undemocratic manner.<sup>8</sup> Consequences for listed organizations and related individuals include blocked assets and an international travel ban.

The New World Summit attempts to explore at what level art can serve as a tool to bypass these restrictions. We have tried to circumvent them by operating as a nomadic parliament: the New World Summit has no fixed geographical location, as it represents no nation state. We make maximum use of the exceptional juridical status of art—that

I propose a necessary art of the stateless state—an art not subject to prehistoric cultural and political structures, but an art that is a driving, imaginative force redefining the space and practice of the commons.



Flags of unrecognized people and states hang on the front of the KVS Royal Flemish theater in Brussels where the New World Summit – Brussels took place in 2014. Photo by Ernie Buts, courtesy of Jonas Staal.

is, of the fact that art, today, is rarely simply present, but rather always simultaneously questioning the conditions of this presence. This *radical ambiguity*, we believe, creates the transformative space in which progressive politics can take shape, free from the restrictive legislative fallout of global anti-terrorism initiatives. Where politics fails, and where democracy's deep state reveals itself at its most explicit, art operates to sustain an alternative political sphere.

The first of the three editions of the New World Summit to have taken place so far occurred May 4–5, 2012, in the Sophiensaele, a theater and space for cultural and political discourse located in Berlin. Invitations were dispatched to roughly 100 organizations mentioned on one of the many international lists of designated terrorist organizations. During this inaugural summit, we were able to host four political and three juridical representatives—as in lawyers—from the following organizations: the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, a guerilla faction that, since the 1970s, has opposed what they consider to be the country's US puppet regime; the National Liberation Movement of Azawad, a Tuareg-led group of insurgents that took over two-thirds of Mali in 2012, striving, in their words, for a “multi-ethnic” and “multi-religious” secular state; the Basque Independence movement, which seeks to redefine the notion of Basque citizenship such that it might be applied to global struggles for self-determination; and the Kurdish Women's Movement, which works in opposition both to the Turkish State and to the male dominant structure within the Kurdish revolutionary movement. Fadile Yildirim, who represented the KWM, proposed a radical feminist reading of history in order to “liberate democracy from the state.” In her words Lenin's “democratism” is echoed: for Yildirim, it is the *legalized* structure within which the secondary status of women is inherently inscribed.

“Democracy” may well have been made possible by state structures, but in order to shape its core principles of egalitarianism—the equal distribution of power and knowledge—we must liberate it from the state, thus disentangling its power monopolies and oligarchies from the capitalist doctrine. I propose a necessary *art of the stateless state*—an art not subject to prehistoric cultural and political structures, but an art that is a driving, imaginative force redefining the space and practice of the commons.

## b. The New World Academy

In the context of the New World Summit, art acts as an imaginative space for a different political arena: the “alternative parliament.” We founded the New World Academy in collaboration with BAK, Base for Contemporary Art in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in order to continue our exploration of art as a force for political restructuring. The New World Academy is a school that invites stateless political groups dealing with systematic political exclusion to work with artists, scholars, and students over a period of three days, during which participants investigate the various roles art might play at the center of political struggle, developing related projects in collaboration with one another. Here, we seek to trace the historical narratives and practices of stateless art.

For instance, the New World Academy invited the refugee collective We Are Here—a group of 225 undocumented migrants who organized themselves politically in 2012—to teach at the school. We Are Here worked with our participants to explore new models for cooperation between artists, students, and refugees. Members of Pirate Parties International were also invited to teach; they developed a “Pirate School” called the Alternative Learning Tank (ALT), in which teachers, students, and citizens were taught basic techniques of email encryption and



anonymous Internet use. Both organizations operate from a condition of statelessness, be it by choice, with the Pirate Parties, or by force, in the case of We Are Here; this condition, we learned, nurtured models for political organization and cultural practice capable of opposing the democratist doctrine, by necessity or by choice.

Teachers from the National Democratic Movement of the Philippines provided a practical application of our theory of art in the stateless state. This organization consists of a variety of underground movements and semi-legally recognized political parties and factions, all of which share a strong leftist, Maoist signature. Together with Movement representatives, our participants developed a new model for “people’s trials”—a trial format intended to allow a civilian base to prosecute larger powers. The historical origins of the National Democratic Movement of the Philippines can be found in the revolutionary figure of Andrés Bonifacio (1863–1897), who in 1896 declared Filipino independence from Spain, which had occupied the country since the 16th century. Bonifacio was aided by the United States, which promised the establishment of an independent Filipino republic during the Spanish-American War of 1898. However, the United States occupied the country until 1946, after which, according to the National Democratic Movement, it continued to instrumentalize subsequent “independent” governments of the Philippines.

In the 1960s, Professor Jose Maria Sison, founder of both the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People’s Army, called for a Second Propaganda Movement, a cultural uprising that demanded independence.<sup>9</sup> It is in this context that the figure of the artist as “cultural worker” emerged and became central to understanding the role of art within the National Democratic Movement. The cultural worker, within this movement, broadcasts the Filipino people’s right to self-determination,

inscribing it through words and images in the imagination of an unrecognized state. The cultural worker uses artistic tools in order to uphold and to communicate the narratives and convictions of the marginalized and the dispossessed. He or she is educator, agitator, organizer, engaged in the maintenance of the symbolic universe of the unacknowledged state—not so much an administrative entity, but rather a collectivity, participant in a shared visual language. As such, a kind of meta-state is created in details; it possesses an independent network of references, histories, and symbols that define identity, even beyond what a territorially or legislatively defined state might ever be able to obtain.<sup>10</sup>

It is within this stateless state that we find the condition that may be understood as a “permanent revolution”—that is, a permanent process of collectively communicating, critiquing, and shaping our understanding of culture, not as an administered identity but as one in constant movement. This does not mean that art can replace—or must obliterate—state structure; instead it suggests that if there should ever be such a thing as a state, it should be reflective of the permanent process through which a people’s culture manifests and expresses itself, not as an administered entity, restricted or restricting any form of communication. Art of the stateless is our way out of prehistory.

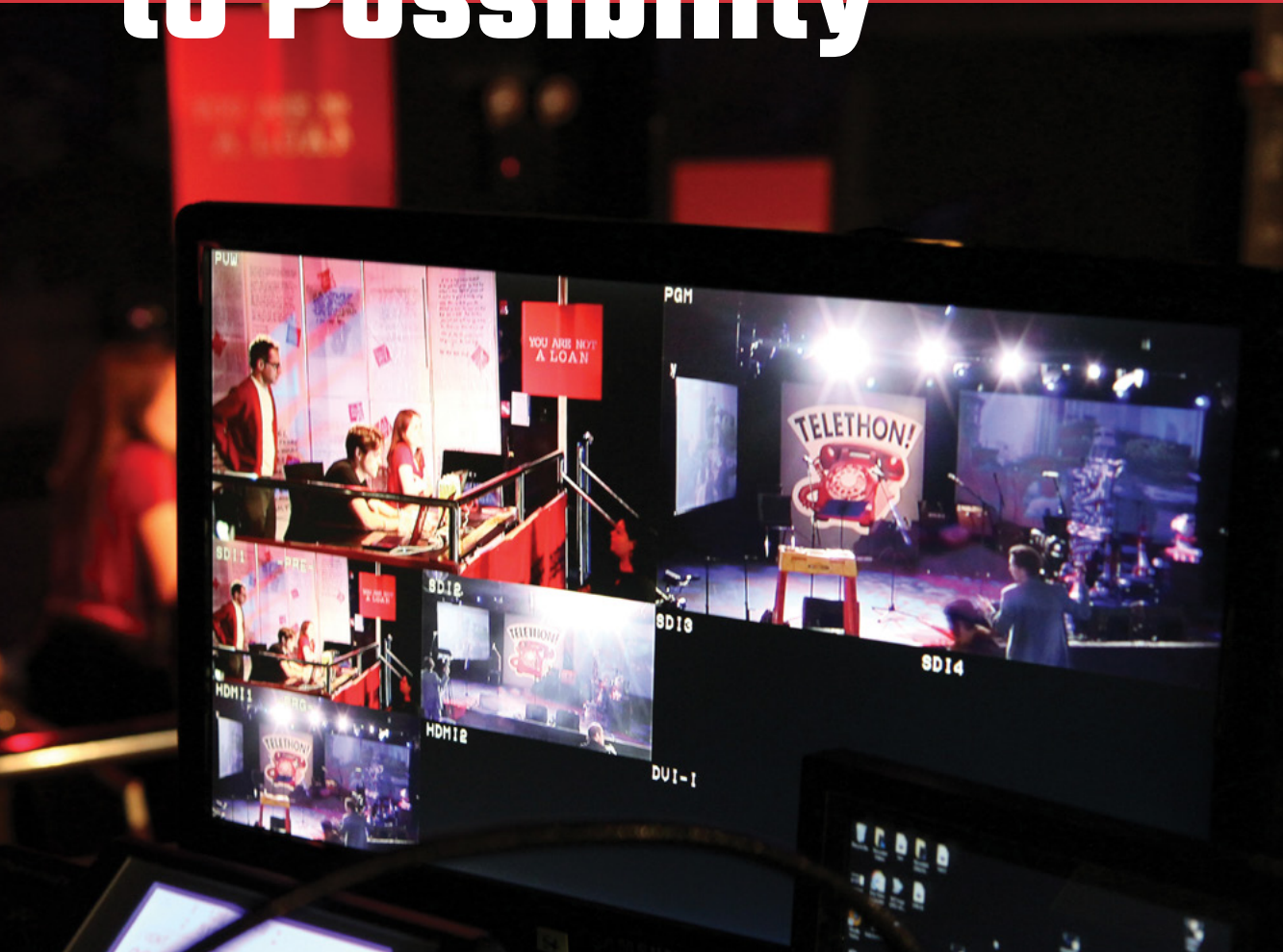
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*Jonas Staal is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy.*

1. Interrogation Log Detainee 063: [www.time.com/time/2006/log/log.pdf](http://www.time.com/time/2006/log/log.pdf); see also Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Jonas Staal, *US Army Torture Devices* (Amsterdam: Gallery Masters, 2007), includes the full, annotated log: [www.jonasstaal.nl/empathy-usarmytorture.pdf](http://www.jonasstaal.nl/empathy-usarmytorture.pdf)
2. Jessica Wolfendale, “The Myth of Torture Lite,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, Volume 23.1, 2009, 47–48.
3. Metin Basoglu, Maria Livanou, and Cvetana Crnobaric, “Torture vs Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment: Is the Distinction Real or Apparent?” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 64, 2007.
4. Vincent Van Gerven Oei, Jonas Staal, *US Army Torture Devices* (Amsterdam: Gallery Masters, 2008), 45.
5. Vladimir Lenin, “Working-Class and Bourgeois Democracy” in *Lenin Collected Works*, Vol. 8 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 72–82.
6. Alain Badiou and Gregory Elliott, *The Rebirth of History* (London-New York: Verso, 2012), 40.
7. Upton Sinclair, *Mammonart* (San Diego: Simon Publications, 2003), 386.
8. *Adding Hezbollah to the EU Terrorist List—Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives*, June 20, 2007.
9. The First Propaganda Movement had manifested itself against the Spanish under the leadership of nationalists and revolutionaries, writers and journalists, among whom José Rizal, Marcelo H. del Pilar, and Graciano López Jaena were central figures.
10. For a more detailed exploration of the concept of the cultural worker and people’s culture: Jonas Staal (ed.), *Towards a People’s Culture* (Utrecht: BAK, Basis voor actuele kunst, 2013), [www.newworldsummit.eu](http://www.newworldsummit.eu)

# Debt as Power: From Shame to Possibility

Thomas Gokey and Laura Hanna,  
two co-founders of Debt Collective,  
on the evolving language around debt and  
organizing potential of debtor unions



The Debt Collective is a pro-union membership organization consisting of debtors, activists, and academics that has successfully eliminated over a billion dollars in debt and boosted collective bargaining as a key weapon in the fight to end Americans' financial despair. It developed out of two previous campaigns that came out of the Occupy movement, Strike Debt and Rolling Jubilee: the former encouraged collective action and offered advice to escape the predatory debt system; the latter bought medical and student debts for pennies on the dollar to write them off. While both provided some good wins, these strategies had limits.

A new idea, Debt Collective, was established in 2014 by Hannah Appel, Thomas Gokey, Laura Hanna, Luke Herrine, Ann Larson, and Astra Taylor to make further progress. The Debt Collective helped aggrieved students from the for-profit Corinthian College to go on strike by withholding loan payments and won cancellation for about \$1 billion. That protest helped build the foundation for the new loan-cancellation plans popular today. 2020 U.S. presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren proposed eliminating up to \$50,000 of debt for each student, and soon after Bernie Sanders proposed eliminating all of it. We asked Thomas Gokey and Laura Hanna, two of the co-founders of Debt Collective to talk about the evolving language around debt and the organizing potential of debtor unions.

Previous: Strike Debt launched The Rolling Jubilee, a campaign to buy debt for pennies on the dollar, with a variety show and telethon in 2012. Photos courtesy of Not An Alternative.

**THOMAS GOKEY:** Looking back to the founding of Debt Collective, the thing that I was just totally wrong about was this emphasis on scale—this idea that we would need millions of people to go on strike to have any real power. When we actually did launch the first student debt strike a few years after that, it started small with 15 people and then it quickly grew to a couple thousand people, which was still a relatively small number of people. But it had such moral force behind it, and it had such media attention behind it, that a strike that started with 15 people has now resulted in over \$1 billion worth of debt discharged. That is a pretty good ratio for the number of strikers to the amount of debt! So, it makes me think that if we are going to get rid of all \$1.7 trillion of student debt—or \$80 billion worth of medical debt—so long as the moral force is there, the numbers can start out smaller potentially. I still think the sky's the limit if we can get millions of people to go on strike though!

**LAURA HANNA:** Yes, that's interesting... there's slippage between what we would perceive as symbolic power or symbolic gesture versus real power. That was something we definitely worked with and learned from in our earlier work. I think we need to understand power in different ways and leverage speech through different platforms, and really continue to build and leverage collective speech. It reminds me of a conversation that I had with Debt Strike co-founder Astra Taylor where we were talking about speech within labor organizing and that collective bargaining in a strike was considered speech. We can get so caught up elevating individual activists, writers, or so-called thought leaders speaking their mind—the individual—that focusing on what collective speech is and how to build power using it is interesting to me. I think that that's a different type of power.

I've also been thinking about the language. Our work has basically entered into the electoral cycle and that's a really important

thing to celebrate and continue to think critically about. There is a difference in the language we use. While we think and talk about debt abolition, the mainstream political and electoral space talk about debt cancellation. We've had a lot of conversations with other activists or advocates around that language. I still prefer "abolition" because the language points to ending a systemic harm rather than simply cancelling out an action. I also like the language of "reparative public goods." There are also other good organizers and activists working on reparative public goods as a project, and I think that our work fits into that. Reparative public goods puts race at the center of the demand for public goods. So the debtors' movement recognizes that not all debt is experienced in the same way because of racialized capitalism and the privatization of public goods as an attempt to deny people access to their rights. While we are challenged around a whole set of problems, I do feel like there is much more action and a kind of coordinated opposition. We have a campaign that we are about to launch on the next student debt strike, and we are always thinking about what motivates people to make demands for public goods and whether people will be willing to stop cooperating in a certain way.

I think that climate change is a very large factor now, and that student debtors might be more likely to go on a student debt strike in connection with a Green New Deal or a broader transition; so that's something that we need to think about and, of course, how we talk about those connections is critical for organizing purposes. Climate change activists are looking at the economy and thinking about strikes in different ways, many activists are younger, and people are searching for new ways to assert power and build leverage. That's on my mind a lot lately. But noting that debt cancellation is now mainstream, that two candidates have talked about it, that they have relied on our work specifically to address solving the problem is really exciting.

## By not naming systemic harm the Right can always use the individual for any story it wants to tell. By creating shame and a stigma around indebtedness the Right effectively silenced large numbers of the population.

**THOMAS:** The landscape really has shifted dramatically. And, you know, even people like Sanders and Warren have shifted dramatically. If you look at some of the legislation that they were introducing several years ago, it wasn't that great. But I certainly welcome the massive shift in the landscape.

**LAURA:** The Right has had the resources to build institutional power that the Left lacks. It is disturbing to see how rightwing mainstream media shapes our public. In the United States we do not use words like "austerity." By focusing on debt rather than austerity one can cut off the possibility of a systemic narrative and instead tell stories about the individual and the individual responsibility. By not naming systemic harm the Right can always use the individual for any story it wants to tell. By creating shame and a stigma around indebtedness the Right effectively silenced large numbers of the population. I recall when we first started organizing, we were stealing the language of the Right in order to flip it on its head. Understanding the neoliberal rightwing narrative around indebtedness is

really important and challenging the false morality is a necessary step. We started our organizing work by meeting people where they were at (experiencing debt as an individual) and then did the hard work to link those experiences to a broader struggle. By taking this approach we are able to break through the shame and translate that into a position of collective power. This is a big part of our political education project.

**THOMAS:** Since the Right is always framing the national debt as being this really important thing, and the reason why we can't provide social goods or public goods, I was also interested in stealing or reframing some of the language of the Right. You know, just recently, for example, Elizabeth Warren announced that she's going to use this mechanism that we have been pushing everyone for: a "compromise and settlement" to modify student debt so that you can just write it down. And the Department of Education's official spokesperson, Liz Hill, said in their official response that "her colleagues and Congress would find it surprising that she has the authority to do so much spending." But why is canceling debt considered "spending?" We don't talk about a tax cut for the 1% as spending. So it really does clarify, for me at least, how this austerity language functions. When you are simply refusing to collect revenue from rich people it's not counted as spending, but when you are refusing to collect revenue from poor people suddenly that's spending!

**LAURA:** I guess we should explain what "compromise and settlement" is and why it's important to communicate that it's not about bypassing Congress.

**THOMAS:** So, what worked for us with the first student debt strike among former for-profit Corinthian College students was combining the pressure of a direct action—of a strike—with a legal mechanism to meet our demands. In that case, it was this very obscure legal mechanism called "Borrower Defense to Repayment" that

almost nobody had heard about, and which had never really been used. But it is existing law that says these debts really should be eliminated. It turns out that even when the law and the facts are on your side, power has a tremendous way of being very reluctant about doing what the law requires... But moving forward, we are asking, "How do we get rid of all student debt or almost all of the student debt?" There is another legal mechanism called the "compromise and settlement" authority that we've put our fingers on. It's a part of the Higher Education Act reauthorization. The law gives the Secretary of Education the authority to write down student debt for any reason, or no reason at all. And we have very good reasons to write down this student debt. It benefits everybody if we do that. But so far the Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has refused to use that power. The way that I've been thinking about this is that it's almost as if Congress, whether they intended to or not, created this giant debt trap of the student debt system and wired into it a self-destruct button...

I think about it like the scene from the first *Star Wars* movie where they got the schematics for the Death Star, and they realized that this massive planet-destroying machine has a fatal flaw in its design. And if you just puncture it in just the right place, the whole thing gets destroyed. And so that self-destruct button is called "compromise and settlement." What we need to do over the course of the next year is organize and use direct action to build power and pressure so that the people can gain access to the levers of power to press that self-destruct button. It's important that we press that self-destruct button in a way that destroys all student debt because only wiping away a small fraction will basically keep lower income working class people with high debt in the same position. They will still have tens of thousands of dollars worth of remaining debt, and the interest is just going to grow until they're back at where they were before.

**LAURA:** If full cancellation were to happen, rather than just destroy student loans, we could also say that the button would help people start to repair their lives. That's also critical.

**THOMAS:** Exactly. We can't underestimate the social and the psychological tax that debt takes. A study was just released showing that for every dollar you raise minimum wage, the number of suicides dramatically reduces by a certain percentage.<sup>1</sup> Poverty and austerity, they show up in so many different problems, that it's hard to capture and calculate the total benefit of living in a society where you can be a dignified human being, where you are encouraged to flourish, and you are encouraged to produce wealth that doesn't necessarily show up in the GDP. There ends up being multiplier effects that you can't calculate. And I feel like we've been in this vicious cycle on the other side, where all of these problems compound and reflect one another. Something has got to give. Somebody online said, "Can you imagine the party in the streets that is going to happen when we have a student debt jubilee, and it's all gone?" And I, for one, hope there are some massive parties in the streets. But to me, the thing that instantly came to mind is, "Oh, I'm not going to be partying in the street. I'm going to get my first good night's sleep in my adult life!" Debt is such an immaterial thing but it shows up in your body. The phrase that comes to mind is "the body keeps score." I feel like I've got my credit score but I've also got this other score that I am ready to settle. *I want to sleep.*

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1. A report by Debt Collective member Luke Herrine provides more detail: <https://bit.ly/2TKqMQ5>

*Thomas Gokey is a visual artist and an organizer with the Debt Collective.*

*Laura Hanna is a filmmaker, media activist and organizer. She co-founded the Debt Collective, an economic justice organization that advocates for the rights of debtors.*

# A Radical Re-settlement:

## Walking the Talk on Indigeneity

Marcus Briggs-Cloud



The organization

Ekvn-Yefolecv

[ *ee-gun yee-full-lee-juh, a double entendre meaning  
Returning to the Earth/Returning to Our Homelands* ]

is a Maskoke collective committed to embracing the role of protecting and reviving traditional relationships to the earth while revitalizing language and culture.

I USED TO THINK that the most critical issue Maskoke People face was language loss as our ancient, yet threatened, language was projected to fall silent by the year 2040. I thought language revitalization was the sole work to be done to restore wellness among our Maskoke People. That monolithic thinking came to an abrupt halt upon awakening to the reality that efficacious language revitalization work is contingent upon numerous interconnected factors that address systemic issues through a holistic lens. In order to see a real reversal of language loss, we have to altogether change the way we live.

The journey goes something like this, I wanted to see my language survive and went from thinking that teaching words for animals, numbers, and colors (like the methodology of most community-based endangered language programs) was actually making an impact, to then thinking that teaching in the university system in Oklahoma was going to be the successful avenue to revitalize Maskoke language, to then realizing that I didn't even have a goal or expectation to know how to assess what success would look like. It took a little time to sort through the many band-aid options but with the Maskoke language on the brink of extinction, I began to promote the message that there should be only one goal to which we aspire in language revitalization work—that is, to grow new *fluent* speakers!

The Indigenous Language Institute estimates only 20 Indigenous languages will still be spoken (in the U.S. context) by the year 2050. It might seem like an elementary concept that the foremost goal of any language program is to grow new fluent speakers, but the reality is, such a goal is actually seldom established. I noticed that when I spoke my own language, it was standard practice to insert English

Previous: A Maskoke child holds tomatoes grown in the Ecovillage greenhouses. Residents grow vegetables based on the traditional diets of their ancestors. Photo courtesy of Marcus Briggs-Cloud.

words amid a sentence for lack of not having that particular term. Since my elders did it, I mirrored their example. After all, it seemed inevitable to speak Maskoke with recurring English usage due to the remarkable amount of time we interface with the English speaking world. I also began noticing that language immersion programs globally were addressing this pervasive issue of obsolescence by importing nouns/concepts from the settler-colonial society around them and crafting new words to convey those nouns/concepts. Initially, this seemed like a worthy practice, but I started thinking more critically about this. In my own Maskoke context, by the time we import into our lexicon 3,000+ words that are inherently premised on post-industrialization capitalist ideology, we've deviated significantly from the unique bio-regionally derived traditional ethos that our ancestors left to us in the first place. We would find our Indigenous ontological worldview, that is inextricably tied to the natural world, flipped upside-down. Therefore, such a practice begs the question, "Why not just speak English?"

In our Maskoke medicinal traditions, practitioners sing prescribed formulas in our language and blow into plant concoctions, which results in an efficacious healing substance to be consumed by members of the ceremonial community. These medicine traditions are required components of Maskoke *Posketv* (often referred to as Green Corn Dance) ceremonies which renew our relationship to the natural world around us. Our prophecies tell us that if we cease conducting our *Posketv* ceremonies, thereby allowing our sacred fires to go out, Maskoke People will perish. No language means no ceremony; no ceremony means Maskoke People will perish. So, ultimately the silence of the Maskoke language equals the disappearance of Maskoke People. Both accommodating the settler-colonial apparatus by inserting so much English amid Maskoke sentences, and the alternative option of composing an abundance of new

To grow new generations of fluent Maskoke language speakers, no English is spoken in Ekvv-Yefolecv's language immersion program. Photo courtesy of Marcus Briggs-Cloud.



## In order to see a real reversal of language loss, we have to altogether change the way we live.

vocabulary to dump into our lexicon felt like an unjust compromise of our indigeneity. I started thinking more radically about a theory of change. It became apparent that we would have to recreate the society in which our language once historically functioned best, which was, unsurprisingly, a society premised on intimate relations with the natural world. From this consciousness emerged the vision to build an ecovillage.

Our ancestors were forcibly removed from what are colonially known as Alabama and

Georgia today, to lands 700 miles away in what are colonially known today as Oklahoma and Florida. It became spiritually evident that we needed to assemble an intentional community of like-minded Maskoke folks who are products of forced removal to return to our homelands for the purpose of committing to both biophysical and ceremonial stewardship of the land our ancestors cared for since time immemorial. Cultivating a vision for a decade and then searching and praying for the most appropriate parcel of land for another five years, Ekvv-Yefolecv closed on 600 acres of our

traditional homelands on January 12, 2018. It is an indescribable feeling to once again reside in the world that our ancestors inhabited.

As we were traditionally an agrarian society, our contemporary society must be centered on agricultural practices in order to provide the host activities for our ancient lexicon to thrive in the most authentic Maskoke way, and more notably to augment the ability to engage agriculture in culturally competent ways. Critical linguistic analysis of Maskoke language enables us to extrapolate the traditional epistemological worldview that our ancestors left to us (as it is intact in the language's grammar), concerning appropriate ways in which we are to interact with the natural world. It establishes an ethic that constrains our ability to participate in the commodification of Earth, *at least when speaking Maskoke language*. In other words, we are forced to resort to English language practices to articulate such environmentally exploitative and extractive activity.

Considering Indigenous language revitalization work then must not contribute to ecological destruction, our community had to start thinking about how we build this ecovillage in non-extractive ways. For instance, our language immersion program, wherein no English is spoken, requires a decolonial lens that penetrates our tendencies to adopt conventional ways in which we school our children—such as not building lesson plans around disposable materials that are only fun for 20 minutes but end up in a landfill shortly thereafter; contributing to methane gas emissions that warm the planet. Additionally, elder language bearers that have diabetes and hypertension do not feel like interacting with many folks when struggling with their sicknesses. Thus, decolonizing our diets became imperative, though this has not happened without resistance from our elders who love soda pop and spam! And, not without working with a dietician for several months

to learn how to cook for persons with chronic illnesses and learning to tailor recipes to traditional foods that we can grow and for which we forage. These are learning curves, as we are having to slowly reclaim traditional knowledge from various sources. We are also learning what it means to eat “traditional foods” in an era of climate crisis wherein our food choices also impact all Peoples' livelihoods. This causes us to reflect on what it means when we say *vnokeckv etemocet fullēt owēs*, “we going about having love for one another” to extend to all Peoples, especially the most vulnerable Peoples of the planet.

We are regularly discerning ways in which we can walk the talk! For instance, we have to: remain conscious of what kind of decolonial language curriculum to build from scratch for our students (across age groups); design and implement regenerative agricultural practices; explore ways to ensure many forms of health for ecovillage residents; develop plans to reduce ecological footprint; generate revenue from non-extractive economy-based ventures so the ecovillage can be sustained; navigate and maintain harmony among diverse personalities—including traditional conflict resolution mechanisms to retain ecovillage population; overcome lateral oppression; learn natural building construction; relearn the ecology of our traditional homelands; try to piece together our traditional canon of stories that provide the foundation for understanding significant ecological places/spaces/species; and the list goes on. Simply trying to save a language from extinction has necessitated the creation of a new society. We are not so naive as to believe that our ecovillage is somehow exempt from globalization or climate crisis, but it is just insular enough to retain our language and culture with exponentially more integrity than we've had the chance to do since we were displaced from our traditional homelands 182 years ago. We can once again be full-time Indians instead of having to schedule our time to be Indian over the weekend at a ceremony.

The author handles a male lake sturgeon in preparation of the spawn as part of the Ecovillage's efforts to restore regional populations of the endangered species in surrounding watersheds. Photo courtesy of Marcus Briggs-Cloud.



It is an indescribable feeling to once again reside in the world that our ancestors inhabited.



In twenty-five years, Ekvv-Yefolecv Maskoke Ecovillage will be the only place on the entire planet where one can go to hear the Maskoke language spoken fluently.

All buildings in the Ecovillage are timber-frame constructed to uphold the community's values in reducing its carbon footprint. Photo courtesy of Marcus Briggs-Cloud.



Ekvn-Yefolecv rejects capital and material accumulation and is an income sharing community wherein residents receive a modest stipend for performing rotating duties, in addition to receiving a timber-framed tiny home for residence. The entire world must learn to slow down and simplify human lifeways. The objective is not to return to a Clovis Indian era of living, but rather incorporate sustainability technologies that provide a good quality of living while demonstrating reverence for Earth and all living beings. Green technologies alone are not the answer, rather, it must be coupled with an entire lifestyle draw-down. As we were compiling an energy budget, it became apparent that certain technologies would not be possible to deploy. For instance, some residents of Ekvn-Yefolecv formerly enjoyed using an instant pot to cook with, but

as minimal embodied energy requirements in fossil fuel consumption and carbon emissions. Felling, skidding, debarking, and milling the timbers is performed by ecovillage residents. Slowing down also requires stewardship of the land and restoration of regional animal populations such as the buffalo and lake sturgeon. The implementation of holistic management with the buffalo through rotational grazing is labor intensive and requires an intimate relationship and trust with the buffalo as opposed to conventional farming practices that lead to soil degradation. We are working to restore a threatened fish species that is sacred to our People, the lake sturgeon, in the watershed from which it was extirpated in the 1950's due to the erection of hydroelectric dams. All of these aforementioned practices require a lot of work

## This is all part of slowing down our lives, which makes us open to the medicine to grow stronger.

an instant pot requires 1000 watts to run a 20 minute session. The typical settler-colonial mainstream response is, "How many more solar panels will we need to run the instant pot and toaster and...?" Our response is simply, "We don't need an instant pot or toaster or...!" This is all part of slowing down our lives, which makes us open to the medicine to grow stronger in our lives. Cutting firewood to operate a rocket oven or rocket mass heater is more time consuming than turning on a grid-tied thermostat, but the rocket mass heater is much more energy efficient—so it's good to Earth. Moreover, one burns lots of calories and strengthens core muscles by harvesting firewood and splitting it. We have adopted timber-framing construction because it coincides with our philosophical values, such

and a lot of time, but that also means less time to participate in capitalist-consumerism. It is also what is necessary, in a spirit of reciprocity, to be in good relationship with the natural world.

Admittedly, minimalist living, income sharing, cleaning composting toilets, swimming with sturgeon, and inhaling bison breath all sound like utopian lifeways, but engaging Maskoke folks in this project has not been without immense ambivalence. Some community members have wrestled with a difficult-to-identify issue that even though the philosophy all sounded "right," their apprehensions were emerging from correlating such a lifestyle to impoverished living conditions in their childhoods. We were all taught to pursue the

American capitalist dream. Recognizing that the ecovillage lifestyle may be simple and associated with living "poor," a number of Ekvn-Yefolecv residents have decided that because they have agency in living this way, and see the genuine quality of life in this paradigm, they have actually come to perceive it as legitimate liberation from oppression.

All this is to say that if one wants to revitalize Maskoke language, not only do you have to speak to children exclusively in the language (NO English) from their pre-verbal stage onward, you also have to: know how to grow beets and native pumpkins for community health and save seed; generate revenue from regenerative practices; clean poop from a bucket instead of wasting potable water to send your poop to an unknown place; toast acorns you harvested in the woods with little kids on a rocket oven that required you to cut wood from the forest; mourn the loss of a sturgeon when she passes and honor the sturgeon with a song each time you harvest one to nourish an elder language bearer; cease mansplaining; quit buying frivolous plastics; turn to the sun each morning and give thanks for the day and for its energy to power your LED lights; and, most importantly, cultivate tons of love and compassion! In twenty-five years, Ekvn-Yefolecv Maskoke Ecovillage will be the only place on the entire planet where one can go to hear the Maskoke language spoken fluently. Through this holistic paradigm, we project that in two generations, having raised children as full-time Indigenous People, Maskoke language will be the primary language spoken at Ekvn-Yefolecv Maskoke Ecovillage. Residents will be spiritually and physically healthy persons who inherited a resilient non-extractive, small-scale society in the midst of climate crisis. We hope to serve as a replicable archetype for other communities to implement in their own contexts premised on intimate relations with the natural world, where our unique languages and cultural lifeways thrive once again.

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*Marcus Briggs-Cloud (Maskoke) is a language revitalizer, scholar, musician, and co-director of Ekvn-Yefolecv.*



# Meet the Progressive Consultancy Cooperative Helping Barcelona

Miguel Robles-Durán in Conversation  
with Gala Pin and Laia Forné

Urban Front is a transnational consultancy cooperative formed in 2019 by independent associates around the world with headquarters in Barcelona, Medellín, Montevideo, New York City, Ottawa, Paris, Quito, and Rotterdam. The group was started by 21 highly experienced practitioners and activists with the goal of providing trans-disciplinary research support and tactical directions to progressive governments, non-governmental organizations, and foundations on critical socio-spatial matters relating to uneven urban development and environmental degradation. The conversation that follows is between three of Urban Front's founding members, structured by Miguel Robles-Durán, to highlight the governance experience of Gala Pin, former City Counselor of Barcelona's Ciutat Vella and Laia Forné, former Director of the Area for Citizen Participation of the Barcelona City Council. From 2015 to 2019, Gala and Laia developed public policies on citizen participation, urban commons, and social innovation for the city of Barcelona, under the leadership of Ada Colau and Barcelona en Comú.



Locals and tourists heavily traffic La Rambla, a 1.2 kilometer pedestrian street running through Barcelona's city center. Cropped from original. Image by osapanacar.

**MIGUEL ROBLES-DURÁN:** To begin the conversation, it is important to contrast Urban Front as a progressive consultancy organization, fully committed to social and environmental justice issues, with the many neoliberal or neoconservative international consultancies such as McKinsey, PricewaterhouseCoopers, or Bloomberg Associates that have monopolized urban consultancy around the world.

**GALA PIN:** There are many companies working with public administrations that specialize in developing public-private enterprises following pre-established, pre-distributed, and/or re-distributive neoliberal frameworks. Urban innovations that come from the private sector are offered to public administrations as for-sale solutions to problems, but it is important to approach these problems from a space that acknowledges that democratic, social, and economic innovation occurs in areas beyond private companies, right? In reality, public administrations need to have the capacity to act and adapt themselves based on the changes that are taking place in society, its urban ecology, and beyond. That's what Urban Front is set to do—to be able to influence public administrations by offering them a range of approximations to the many urban problems that they constantly address from a social and environmental justice perspective, rather than the neoliberal one offered by the competition, which mainly focuses on benefiting private profits above everything else. A city is not just an urban design problem, a mobility problem, a housing problem, or an inequality problem, but rather a city is a complex of all these situations. In order to address these problems you must have a transversal and integral vision of its realities. This is where Urban Front can be a very useful tool for public administrations, as it is able to offer more capacity to intervene in these increasingly complex social realities for the social and environmental good.

**LAIA FORNÉ:** What I perceived while working in Barcelona's administration is that, usually, serious advances were made when the administration was able to think together with other actors who possessed other types of knowledge, which is very different from the specific bureaucratic knowledge of the administration. So, in that sense, the tripartite collaboration between public administrations, social movements, and a progressive knowledge platform such as Urban Front can generate the type of knowledge necessary for urban social innovations to emerge. However, for this to happen, Urban Front has to be able to compete in the public market place, which is currently where public resources drain to the private sector. Here, a big question emerges. How is a progressive urban consultancy group like Urban Front able to compete with many of the multinational neoliberal consulting companies that plague public administrations today?

In Barcelona, at the scale of the municipality, it was easier to work with local progressive think tanks or small consulting groups. But as soon as you began to scale up, both at the territorial or regional level, as well as into matters of service infrastructures and environmental problems—for example on energy, migration, or global warming issues—it was almost impossible to find progressive partners that were compatible with our left political positions. All you could find were pro-neoliberal multinational consulting corporations.

This may be the advantage of Urban Front being a transnational consultancy network, as it can inform any administration about what is happening in other places. While it is very difficult to replicate things from one territory to another, Urban Front is able to give public administrations tools that they can then adapt or use as a basis for thinking of approximations to problems on a local level. Urban Front is also able to put public administrations in contact



Gala Pin, right, on stage with Ada Colau, the Mayor of Barcelona, for a Barcelona en Comú open meeting. Photo by Marc Lozano, courtesy of Barcelona en Comú.

**Urban innovations that come from the private sector are offered to public administrations as for-sale solutions to problems,**

**but it is important to approach these problems from a space that acknowledges that democratic, social, and economic innovation occurs in areas beyond private companies.**

**Splashy physical urban interventions by “starchitects” don’t have an integral vision of the social, economic, and environmental dynamics that pertain to the place.**



Gala Pin, the former councilor of citizen participation in the Barcelona City Council, leads an open meeting with residents in her district Ciutat Vella. Photos by Marc Lozano, courtesy of Barcelona en Comú.



with other administrations when it might make sense to delve into similar problems together. We want administrations in different places to collaborate and work as networks too.

I don’t know if Urban Front might one day be able to fully compete or not, but to be able to think of alternatives to the big companies that already operate in the market is an imperative objective. Although there is a will of progressive governments to work with others, the hard part for them today is finding outside consultancies that can really develop services on a higher scale in terms of territory or production level.

**MIGUEL:** Let’s talk about your experiences working inside Barcelona’s government. You are both mentioning the need to introduce different approaches to urban governance, and you are both bringing into topic the necessity of inter-urban or inter-regional cooperation as well as the application of custom transdisciplinary frameworks of understanding and approaching complex urban processes. Can you think of a concrete example in Barcelona’s public administration that might give us a better sense of the progressive mental shifts that you are talking about?

**GALA:** The administration’s approach to the transformation of the Rambla [a popular pedestrian boulevard that runs through the city center] comes to mind. We decided not to immediately seek a dramatic multi-million Euro, large-scale spatial restructuring, but rather an intervention adapted to the current needs of the city. We acknowledged that splashy physical urban interventions by “starchitects” don’t have an integral vision of the social, economic, and environmental dynamics that pertain to the place.

So, we developed an international competition that looked for an interdisciplinary team with a methodology that addressed the urban environment—that is, social rights, culture,

mobility, and tourism. The competition forced the team that won to focus on strategies that involved local communities, social problems, environmental concerns, and the like. The strategies addressed urban transformations such as promoting culture and public spaces for community interactions in the Rambla, and solutions to tourist overcrowding. Taking these elements into account, the urban technicians drew up the physical proposal to transform the Rambla. So, in this case it was pretty positive because the process forced urban transformations to be generated with a diverse group of people. Friends who are dedicated to critical urbanism or social rights issues were suddenly being called by well-known architecture firms asking if they would join their team because they didn’t have the ability to do that.

**MIGUEL:** In which way, Gala, could a transnational urban consultancy cooperative like Urban Front have supported your efforts in public administration?

**GALA:** When we were addressing the issue of drug dealing in empty houses in Raval [a neighborhood along the Rambla], for example, we needed a plan that included the many perspectives of the community. Most administrations would have addressed this issue purely from a security perspective, but we needed to ensure that the most vulnerable people were not left behind which, in this case, were the heroin users. We wanted to approach it from many vantage points—health, socio-spatial transformation, housing, the police, and the community—and a consultancy group like Urban Front could have helped administrations find all the interconnected entry points for dealing with these complex issues.

For example, one of the things we didn’t do in the administration, and which I think Urban Front could have provided, was to develop indicators to evaluate the public policies that are implemented from an integral and

transdisciplinary perspective. Normally, administrations tend to work with indicators that are hyper-deterministic—by this I mean indicators that come from a static singular point of view or that measure a singular outcome. Being transdisciplinary by nature, Urban Front has the capacity to develop complex and dynamic indicators that cross-reference and transversally dissect the many outcomes of a public policy, as well as aid in predicting variations and indeterminacies of the social dynamics as they respond to a policy or policies.

**MIGUEL:** Laia, one very important project that you worked on while in the administration was the development of a digital platform for citizen participation called *Decidim*. The other day, David Harvey [another member] and I were talking about how Urban Front needs to develop digital tools that can mediate public governance, community needs, and policy. How was your experience leading the development and implementation team?

**LAIA:** *Decidim* is a good example because it actually works, and it goes to the root of many things. It supports all the existing tools that the city council uses at all decision levels and is free, open source software. For the first time, public money was used to create public and open digital platforms, and this has produced an important shift in the administration's digital investment approach. We tried to bridge existing management models within the administration. The city council had in place tools that internalized the execution of its annual plan and mandate, closing it from public view, but through *Decidim*, we made it possible to communicate directly to citizens the degree of compliance with this plan in real time. *Decidim* transforms an internal management tool through which municipal workers communicate into something that the public can use to hold accountability and to propose improvements directly to the administration itself.

**GALA:** To add to what Laia said, *Decidim* was conceived out of the slogan, “Public money, public code,” which has to do with development of free software *as a public policy proposal*. A big problem for the city council of Barcelona, as well as for many other municipalities of the Spanish State, is that the software management, and therefore, the knowledge of the management, is outsourced to private software companies which create the technological solutions that the administrations implement. What *Decidim* proposes is public-community governance, so to speak, where the governance of that software takes place among those who use it. The knowledge of management is shared, which is very important because otherwise you end up privatizing the knowledge of the tools that the public administration has and, above all, of critical infrastructures.

As an interface, *Decidim* proposes the articulation of listening mechanisms between the inside and outside, which is all part of being able to have citizen participation beyond the formal spaces generated by the physical gathering of a town hall. *Decidim* has a section for each process that allows documents related to that process to be posted, from a neighborhood movement to the creation of a land use plan. Obviously, it does not mean that everyone is going to read something like a land use plan, but you have to work from the idea that people are not idiots and understand the complexities involved, and that there are citizens with expertise that you have to be able to integrate. And above all, *Decidim* was imagined and designed to generate collective debate and not as reproduction of another cryptic and bureaucratic digital tool.

**MIGUEL:** Urban Front could approach software development by emphasizing the training of people in the communities on coding, graphic design, or management, so that the same communities could develop the digital platform while they create new working

**You have to work from the idea that people are not idiots and understand the complexities involved, and that there are citizens with expertise that you have to be able to integrate.**

cooperatives in relation to the production of this new tool.

**GALA:** Also, since this is software that the public owns, Urban Front could suggest ways different groups could modify the software later and continue using it for other needs. You don't have to go back and renew the contract with any of the private companies that have monopolized this space and pay a lot of public money to them.

**MIGUEL:** Laia, there is much talk within Urban Front about the governance paradigm shift from the public-private partnerships to the public-communitarian. This has also been a goal of many involved in Barcelona's public administration. How can Urban Front support this needed shift?

**LAIA:** What Urban Front proposes is the need of making another type of economy that can reproduce community, collective, and cooperative knowledge. Perhaps the first thing we need to do to support public administrations in this shift is to identify exactly who is operating in the urban territory at the level of economic capital, and who they are connected to, and what sectors they control, right?

I believe that most public administrations today have little or no capacity to really know the private actors that drain public investment, and that without these diagnoses it is very difficult for any administration to take measures in this critical area. Urban Front has the knowledge to diagnose and develop useful tools to go deeper and make action in the public-private space much more just and efficient. This, with the support of local communities and their knowledge, can encourage the formation of new public-community partnerships that can replace neoliberal public-private dogmas.

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*Laia Forné is an urban sociologist specializing in urban planning, democracy, and commons, and has served as an advisor for public administrations in Barcelona, Spain.*

*Gala Pin is a former councilor in the first legislature of Barcelona en Comú where she was in charge of citizen participation and the district of Ciutat Vella.*

*Miguel Robles-Durán is co-founder of Cohabitation Strategies, a non-profit cooperative for socio-spatial development, and an Associate Professor of Urbanism at The New School in New York City.*



# A River Basin as Governance Lab

Raquel de Anda and  
Alejandro Meitin

Like concentric circles reverberating from a stone dropped in water, sitting within the estuary of the La Plata River places one within the overlapping spheres that make up the Río de la Plata, a vast South American water drainage basin spanning numerous countries and populations, second in size only to the Amazon basin. For three decades, artist and lawyer Alejandro Meitin has worked within this immense natural network and over four years ago established *Casa Río*, a bioregional center of exchange, training, and learning built on the premise that revolutionary actions must be wedded to the environmental context in which they exist. Meitin spoke with Raquel de Anda about the implications self-governance and decolonization have within the grassroots ecological-political organization, and what changes an approach rooted in artistic practices could effect upon the colossal landscape and the people and environments which inhabit it.

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**RAQUEL DE ANDA:** Can you provide some background about your practice? How long have you been working in the estuary of La Plata River and can you talk about the political history of the area?

**ALEJANDRO MEITIN:** My work begins in the area of the southern coastal strip of the estuary of La Plata River, where I was born. The estuary is the final section of La Plata River Basin, the second largest basin in South America, and covers an area of approximately 3,200,000 square kilometers. To get an idea of its size, it is approximately one third of the total area of the United States and it is almost equal to the total area of all the countries that make up the European Union. From its watershed, the basin area includes part of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay, all of which feed into a very large tributary network and provide water to the whole region.

It's economically very important, just as the Mississippi Basin is for the United States. So

Opposite: A map showing the area encompassed by the Río de la Plata drainage basin. Image courtesy of Alejandro Meitin.

this brings together a series of issues that are closely related to the topic of watershed geopolitics. I am particularly interested in investigating the linkages of these large basins with the European and Asian markets. I am also interested in the political dynamics that occur in Latin American territories which are directly influenced by global economies and extractive industries.

I live approximately 60 kilometers from the City of Buenos Aires in a very small town called Punta Lara where we can somewhat see the advances of this great mega-city and analyze and speculate from the space that is Casa Río, not only the question of the geopolitics of basins, but also the advances of urban areas or marginal areas and the dynamics which are established by urban growth.

**RAQUEL:** What is Casa Río Power to do Lab and how did it develop from *Ala Plástica*, the organization that you had co-founded earlier?

**ALEJANDRO:** Over the last 30 years, I developed a practice through an institutional approach with *Ala Plástica* and, in the last 4-5

years, with the creation of Casa Río Power to do Lab, which is the new structure I have been working on to build another type of strategy in the territory. Operating since 1991, Ala Plástica functioned as an artistic-environmental organization with characteristics of a non-governmental nature. In 2014, one of the last projects of Ala Plástica called for the basins to be a governance laboratory, which we developed together with Brian Holmes, Sarah Lewison, Critical Art Ensemble, and Argentine, American, Barcelonian, and Ecuadorian artists. It was like a farewell piece for Ala Plástica, but in turn, gave way to the experience of Casa Río in 2016, where we continued with the artists who had participated in the experience of the basins as governance laboratories.

I dedicated myself to building another type of organization that had in its interior the things that Ala Plástica did not have. Casa Río is a laboratory located in Punta Lara, a place for research on practices—as the name says, a “to do lab”—and has an influence on the entire area of La Plata Basin, where our work has been focused for many years. At this time Casa Río is made up of a group of lawyers,

architects, biologists, and young computer scientists. It is specifically focused on working on micro but also macro-political issues in the form of a research study.

**RAQUEL:** I would love to know a little about how you work in Casa Río as a multidisciplinary group with strong relationships with the environment, with the lands, but also with different countries. How do you make decisions and who is included? How do you work on a hyper-local level and then on large scales? How does that way of growth work?

**ALEJANDRO:** We have launched directly into a vast territory of a large-scale initiative called *Humedales Sin Fronteras* (Wetlands Without Borders). It is somewhat the consolidation of a project that we have been working on in the basins as a governance laboratory with local artists and communities, with regional nodes and organizations in Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentina. We are working on global or bioregional axes on several issues all of which are focused on the La Plata Basin area, such as specific defense interests on the construction of large mega-dams over the Paraná river, the



An islander and the Port of La Plata in Argentina. Photo by Joan Vila Puig.

creation of biocultural corridors, or the delta’s daily sustainable development.

We work with more than 18 organizations at the territorial level. By inviting political actors, community actors, and scientists into this bioregional initiative, we are incorporating the perspective of artistic practice and social transformation onto large-scale dimensions with a geopolitical analysis. The idea is that the distinctiveness of these types of networks of organizations—that can function in many parts of the world—can work in the form of regional alliances that have real impact on decision-making processes.

We have been working in this way since the days of Ala Plástica, and recognize in the territory that this practice of artistic impact is very important for everything that is related to processes of connecting to the territory, of creation, of agreements, and of strategic dialoguing with communities—even with political and scientific actors.

We work with young people, women’s groups, grassroots organizations, and representatives of the scientific field, as importantly as with those in the political sphere, to create a new approach to these areas in the decision-making process. That is why the vision of governance that we speak of is not the vision of governance of, say, The World Bank, but rather the construction of a political muscle that is developed from a territorial perspective and what we define as the *vocation* of place. To not repeat a discourse created in the United States or in Europe, or even continue an artistic practice clearly influenced by the United States-Europe axis, but instead to create our own adventure, our own utopia, our own form of creation related to this territory, with this community.

That does not mean that it is independent of what is happening on the global scale. It simply means that we need to decolonize our

## The vision of governance that we speak of is not the vision of governance of, say, The World Bank, but rather the construction of a political muscle.

thinking and work on the foundations of what our territory has to say.

**RAQUEL:** I love that way of articulating it. I would like to know a little more about your way of understanding the importance of working as an artist. How has this idea of the artist manifested in your practice? Likewise, how is it different from perhaps how the State would work in a place or on one of the ideas or issues that you focus on?

**ALEJANDRO:** The State, including academic entities or the entire constituted institution, works top down. It is a super-structure that descends on a territory, and that super-structure tries to achieve a certain premeditated objective. In our case at Casa Río, like Ala Plástica before it, we emerge from the community space in which we work. We never focus on thinking about our practices as projects, but rather we work with long-term initiatives and exercises that were given as a way to effect meaning throughout that work or that “doing,” let’s say. Since I work in the social



Top: Who designs the territories? And for who are they designed? A performance in Campaign 4 of Collaborative Territories/Flooded Pedagogies. Photo courtesy of Alejandro Meitin.

Bottom: Wetland Law Now! A letterpress workshop organized as part of a campaign along the Paraná River delta for the project Collaborative Territories/Flooded Pedagogies. Photo courtesy of Alejandro Meitin.

field, I do not enjoy arriving in a community already knowing what that community is able to reproduce in order to have the promised outcome for the commissioning agent.

We have also developed a subprogram called *Territorios de Colaboración, Pedagogías de lo Anegado* (Collaborative Territories, Flooded Pedagogies) where we connect artists who have a long history of working in social contexts with communities that have a long history in social transformation, and together these groups generated five campaigns along 400 kilometers in wetland territories of the great Paraná River delta. The emerging works of this transversal assembly were produced and presented as part of the international exhibition *The Earth Will Not Abide* in April 2019, in the city of Rosario, one of the largest grain exporting ports in the world. We also held a three-day convening of 40 people, including representatives of NGOs, environmentalists, local political figures, journalists, artists, and inhabitants of the islands. We included people expelled from their lands for fighting for the approval of a “Wetland Law” which would have

provided a conservation framework for riverine environments in Argentina, including its human and non-human inhabitants. A key part of this work was the creation of an interactive map, made with open source mapping technology.

This type of cross-sector collaboration brings to mind an individual project I developed last year in the city of Bucaramanga, Colombia at the invitation of the collective Espacios Revelados/Changing Places. In the city, there were protests of 70,000-80,000 people in defense of the city’s water supply. The entire region drinks water from the Santurban Páramo, a very pristine Andean tundra that was being threatened by a large international gold mining company. Grounded in the idea of post-extractivism, I organized a local team of artists and organizers and proposed to create a cryptocurrency whose value asset is represented by the *unextracted* minerals encapsulated in the mountain itself. Despite the political pressure they experienced, the local young people I was working with found such inspiration in the idea; they considered this their life’s project. So we continued working long-distance, and less than a month ago we officially formed CORPBAM [The Bank is the Mountain Corporation], of which I am the vice president, and the cryptocurrency WAcoin. To create local accountability, an important part of the cryptocurrency will remain in the hands of the miners and farmers of the tundra who are creating great pressure, so that extractive mining does not destroy the ecoregion and contaminate Bucaramanga’s water. The currency will increase its value to the extent that the Páramo is not altered and will be used to support conservation and preservation projects of said ecosystem.

This connects back to the issue of geopolitics in the territories in La Plata Basin and the major issue of mining in Latin America today. There has been more active resistance from the affected communities and environmental groups who are participating in the struggle

to defend the ecosystems, nature, and the viability of communities.

**RAQUEL:** This work is absolutely necessary in a time when there are powers so great which are already entrenched in our countries—in the whole world—and at the same time, where there are very strong pockets of resistance that have been working for generations.

I’d like to address the idea of transformative change. What is always necessary for me is to find a balance between a vision of utopia, or a direction of where we want to go, and at the same time, understand what needs to be done right now with what is in front of us. Can you share some ideas about how you handle these ideas of utopia—of big systemic transformation—while managing the often difficult and complex tasks of daily life?

**ALEJANDRO:** You just have to throw yourself into the search for these utopias, trusting in its emergence, trusting in what will happen. I don’t believe that a result can be predetermined. The challenge is to advance the things that one believes and trust in the emergence of it, while constantly strengthening more and more one’s values and distancing oneself from one’s “anti-values.” But hey, these are searches that everyone has to do in their own lives. The only thing I can say is: do good without looking unto whom, and trust the emergence.

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*Alejandro Meitin is an artist, lawyer, and social innovator. He is the founder of the art collective Ala Plástica based in the city of La Plata, Argentina, and Casa Río Power to do Lab.*





# Organizing Mutual Solidarity Projects as an Act of Resistance in Puerto Rico

Jorge Díaz Ortiz

SINCE DECEMBER 28, 2019, hundreds of earthquakes have hit Puerto Rico, which is still recovering from damage caused by Hurricane María in 2017. Three weeks after the first earthquakes, on January 18, 2020, a social media independent reporter was tipped off to a warehouse in Ponce, a city south of the main island of Puerto Rico, where aid had been withheld since recovery efforts post-María.

So when the reporter, *El Leon Fiscalizador* (The Auditor Lion), announced the existence of a government-managed warehouse full of aid, dozens of people started arriving at the scene. Thousands watched the live feed on Facebook in complete disbelief of the revelation that there was all of this undistributed aid in the middle of an ongoing seismic disaster two and

*Above: End the Debt! Decolonize! Liberate Puerto Rico!*, a hand-illustrated scroll over 170 feet long and 3 inches wide created by artists from AgitArte and Papel Machete, in collaboration with Estefanía Rivera, Crystal Clarity, Rachel Schragis, and Emily Simons. All rights reserved, AgitArte.

a half years after the aid was supposed to have been distributed. People kept arriving and eventually held an assembly to decide whether or not they would open the warehouse and release the much needed aid. The decision was made to distribute the aid to the hundreds of people who had now gathered desperately seeking supplies.

Over the next couple of days new protests were called, as the people of Puerto Rico were infuriated by the government's slow and inadequate response to yet another ongoing disaster. It was a repetition of the corruption and incompetence of the federal and local governments that became clear after Hurricane María and was aggravated by the neoliberal colonial mechanisms imposed on our islands, as exemplified by the Fiscal Control Board, that benefit private corporations and the political and financial elite at the expense of the Puerto Rican people.

Back in 2017, I was in Chicago launching the *When We Fight, We Win! Arts and Culture Tour*, which culminated in the painting of a mural in Chicago celebrating the release of Puerto Rican political prisoner, Oscar López Rivera. The mural was a collaboration between the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and AgitArte, our organization of working class artists engaged in intersectional cultural solidarity and mutual aid projects in the United States and Puerto Rico.

In Puerto Rico, AgitArte was developing the networks and relationships to train folks who were doing frontline work against the austerity and privatization imposed by the fiscal control board. This oversight body was created by PROMESA [the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act] in 2016 and comprised of seven officials, appointed by the U.S. President, who have power over the Puerto Rican economy to pay back Puerto Rico's onerous debt.

*Jornada Se Acabaron las Promesas*, a diverse group of frontline militant activists, organized a series of very effective actions that culminated on August 31, 2016, when Jornada stopped the first PROMESA conference held in Condado, Puerto Rico. The success of direct actions energized the movement, and a training on techniques to be used on the streets was organized with Ruckus Society (a multi-racial network of trainers in direct action) the weekend before Hurricane María hit.

I got back to Puerto Rico on Friday, September 16th, and by the end of the weekend we received news of the unavoidable hit of Hurricane María's path towards our islands. We didn't have time to plan much, but we established two meeting points, the *Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico* (Federation of Teachers), a very progressive and militant union in Puerto Rico, and *Casa Taller Cangrejera*, AgitArte's community and cultural hub and artist workshop in Santurce. In Casa

Taller we prepared over the next two days for the coming of the hurricane. We had over a dozen volunteers, and we housed a couple of families who were in unsafe houses.

Hurricane María was catastrophic. Everything and everyone was affected. We lost power and barely had working telephone service, and there was no running water on most of the islands. We started hearing about the increasing deaths throughout the island. Funeral homes were reporting that they could not keep up with the growing number of bodies arriving each day. The government collapsed and the lack of aid from federal authorities after Hurricane María opened up the possibility to build autonomous community initiatives of mutual support, and grassroots organizational structures emerged based on cooperation and solidarity. We knew very little at the time of the immense devastation throughout the archipelago until we started brigades to bring aid to communities all over the island. We organized self-managed spaces around the main island known as *Centros de Apoyo Mutuo* (Mutual Support Centers or CAMs for short). In the CAMs, the following three main functions were:

- Establishing community kitchens and dining rooms where free meals were prepared and served
- Organizing collection centers where local and diaspora aid was collected for distribution in the communities according to needs assessed during visits to peoples' homes
- Forming permanent solidarity brigades to open roads and access to homes and support in agriculture and housing reconstruction

Public spaces formed as CAMs brought much needed food and supplies to communities which were totally abandoned by the state.

These critical community spaces were initiated by organizers, activists, and community members who worked together for years as part of an extended community of teachers, social workers, students, lawyers, and artists in frontline struggles against privatization and the US-imposed Fiscal Control Board.

People from all over Puerto Rico came to Casa Taller Cangrejera to check in and figure out how to start brigades. Our squad members in New Orleans and Boston initiated a fundraising campaign and sent a lot of aid to communities in Puerto Rico. The rapid distribution of aid and the creation of these Centros was possible due to the transnational relationships which had been built through years of working arm in arm with our kindred organizations and communities in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico.

At one point, there were 14 functioning CAMs throughout urban and rural areas of the main island of Puerto Rico's archipelago. As the projects progressed, CAMs also offered the services of popular health clinics, cultural activities, community garden workshops, and educational projects for adults and children. In addition to providing support to overcome urgent needs in communities, we created discussion spaces to generate critical dialogue, and the understanding that we were facing a political disaster even more dangerous than the natural disaster.

AgitArte also initiated a theatrical and visual arts rapid response in communities and CAMs around the island. This resulted in posters like "Fuck FEMA and the US Military, Release the Aid," a middle finger in protest of the

## We were facing a political disaster even more dangerous than the natural disaster.



Section of *End the Debt! Decolonize! Liberate Puerto Rico!* depicting the staggering number of deaths caused by Hurricane María. Photo by Pablo Delano.

withholding of aid by federal authorities, and *No comemos austeridad*, “We don’t eat austerity,” a reminder that neoliberal politics have a daily effect on people’s ability to cover their basic needs. We also developed a *cantastoria*, a sung picture storytelling performance that showed and spoke of the catastrophe and disaster capitalism brought upon by the management after the natural disaster.

The highlight of our artistic projects in response to the Hurricane was the *End the Debt! Decolonize! Liberate Puerto Rico!* Scroll project, which tells a story of struggle and resistance to U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico and its diaspora. The hand-illustrated scroll is over 170 feet long and 3 inches wide of continuous moving images, performed with an original song by the theater group Papel Machete. The visual art and performance piece was created by artists from AgitArte and Papel Machete, in collaboration with Estefanía Rivera, Crystal Clarity, Rachel Schragis, and Emily Simons. This project was also part of the *When We Fight, We Win! Arts & Culture Tour*. All of these projects were an integral part of the mutual aid work where artists organized to counter the government’s messaging of “normalization” on the island when people were still suffering.

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The government has lost its credibility with the Puerto Rican people. This has been a growing sentiment towards a colonial and federal government, which has submitted people to extreme austerity measures while they—the political class and the powerful economic interests of Wall Street—continue to find new ways to extract any possible resource from our islands.

I still remember hearing U.S. General Richard Kim, in charge of the relief and military operations in Puerto Rico after the hurricane,



Papel Machete performing the *cantastoria Solidaridad y Sobrevivencia para Nuestra Liberación* at PAM (Proyecto Apoyo Mutuo Mariana) - Humacao. Photo courtesy of Jorge Díaz Ortiz.

state in an interview that they were going to have to open the ports up so bottled water could get to the supermarkets. In other words, they had to allow merchandise to get to the stores so people could continue buying those same necessities, which were sent for them as aid. He never spoke of actually releasing the immense amounts of aid—thousands of cargo containers containing basic necessities for survival—sitting in the same ports of entry awaiting inspections and distribution. It became clear that the concern of the colonial government and federal authorities were with the profit margins of U.S. corporations, and not the welfare of the people in need.

This is a metaphor for the whole management of the catastrophe. An opportunity for disaster capitalists to make money from the misery of the people of Puerto Rico through federal funds, energy contracts, food and water, which was paid for and never delivered; the shutting down of public schools; and the facilitation

of the displacement of our people through policies like opportunity zones and community block grants.

The #rickyrenuncia movement in the summer of 2019 where hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans took to the streets, and through direct action and confrontation with the repressive forces of the state made then-governor Ricardo Rosselló step down, was the culmination of a process of rejecting the politics of disaster capitalism, and the total abandonment of the people by the state after María. Thousands of pages of chats between the governor and other government officials were revealed including homophobic comments and total disdain for the people of Puerto Rico; including mocking the dead after the hurricane. It felt like people were finally able to channel the pent-up rage of the abuses we have endured. Artists of all backgrounds and identities were front-and-center and instrumental in the shifting of consciousness throughout the islands in favor of the governors’ resignation. These were highlighted by visual arts, performances, and the popular dance party *perreo combativo* on the streets in one of the most important and intersectional movements of our times.

New challenges are faced now with a new governor who represents a continuation of the same politics of the preceding governor as proven by the crisis of unsafe schools after the earthquakes, the lack of aid to both hurricane and earthquake victims, and the normalization of the social and economic crisis we are living in. This is the reality that will continue to worsen if we continue to be governed by the Fiscal Control Board and treated as a colony of the United States, which has condemned us to serving the interests of the United States at the expense of the people of Puerto Rico.

Nonetheless the exercises of self-governance, or as we called them *ejercicios de independencia*, experienced in the CAMs and when people came together to oust an

abusive colonial governor, are great examples of a transformation that’s possible when the material conditions and the will of the people come together. The fissures created after catastrophes in the management of emergencies by the state can create conditions for breaks in the hegemony of our colonial state and permit for new structures of governance and power. These are much needed exercises of autonomous action and organizing, which inform practices and ideas of future alternatives to the organization of the state and society.

Current and future possibilities for self-governance must be grounded in a culture of mutual solidarity to generate and nurture new and existing structures in society, engaging in a praxis of autonomous action and collective agency. As our people recover from numerous earthquakes and aftershocks, the network of mutual aid centers was once again ready to act immediately and meet the needs of their communities. Using a group chat created after Hurricane María, the CAMs have identified needs, located sources for aid and supplies, coordinated brigades and the distribution of aid, and communicated with the Puerto Rican diaspora with what and where to send support. This kind of rapid response and coordination would not have been possible without the network *Red de Apoyo Mutuo* (Network of Mutual Support) formed after María. Functioning from the lens of mutual aid and solidarity, the network is another living example that the Puerto Rican people are organized and, with proper resources and autonomy, the most equipped to support each other.

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*Jorge Díaz Ortiz is co-founder of AgitArte and a founding member of Papel Machete. He is a puppeteer, popular educator, and bicultural organizer with over 25 years of experience.*



**NO  
COMEMOS**



**AUSTE-  
RIDAD**

**CENTROS DE APOYO MUTUO**

“a reminder that neoliberal politics  
have a daily effect on people’s ability  
to cover their basic needs”

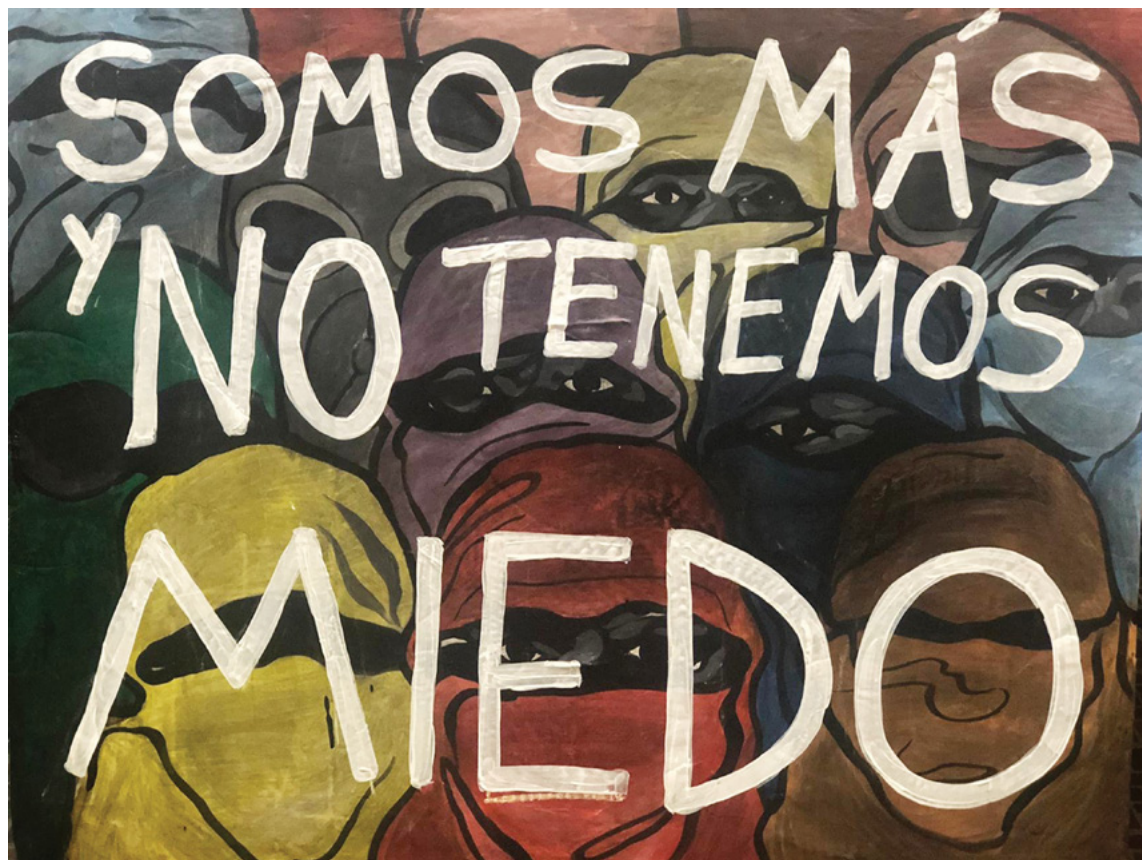
*No comemos austeridad /  
We don't eat austerity*

Artwork by José “Primo” Hernández,  
courtesy of AgitArte.

*Aquí servimos solidaridad /  
Here we serve solidarity*

Artwork by Javier Maldonado O’Farrill,  
courtesy of AgitArte.



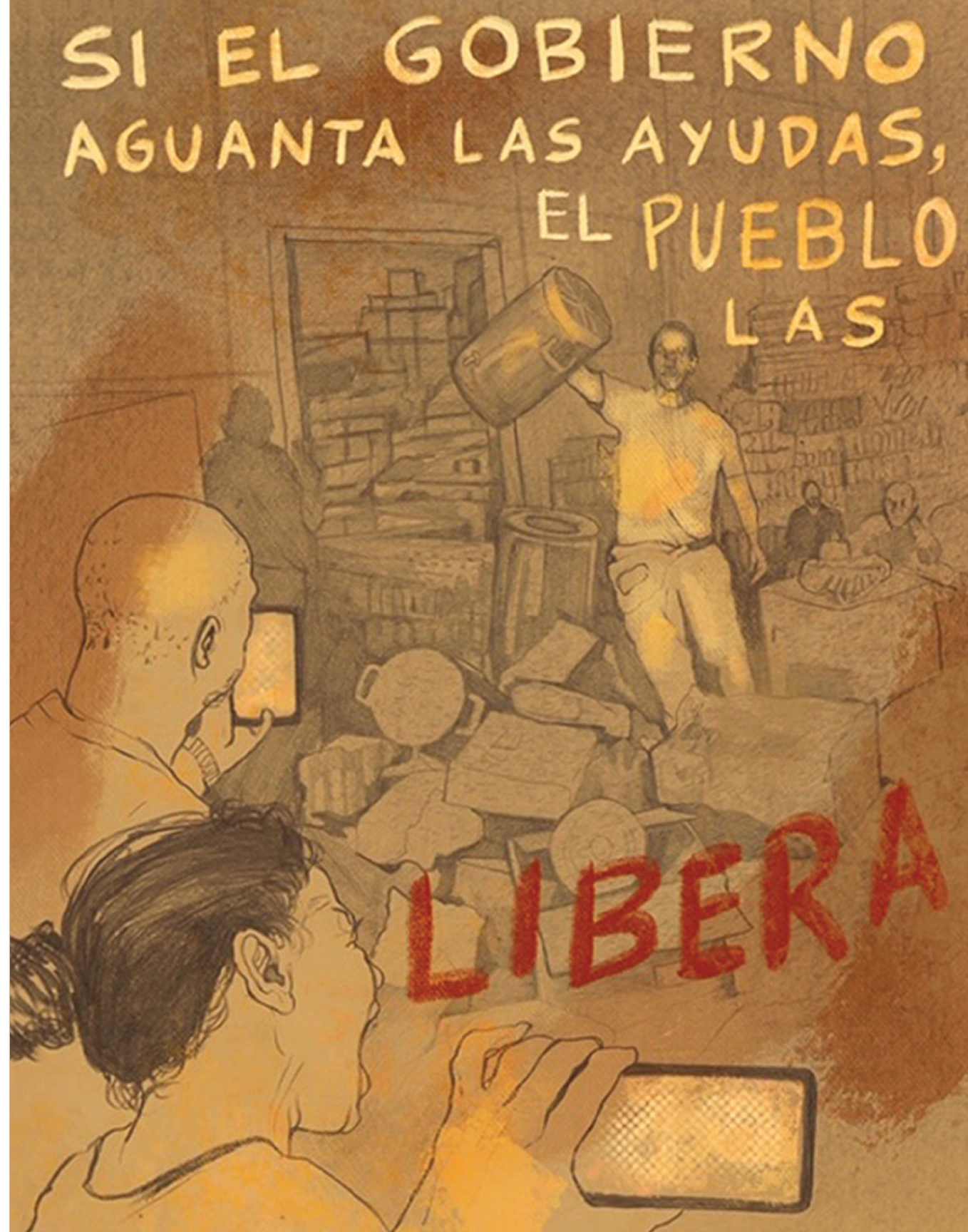


*Somos mas y no tenemos miedo /  
We are more, and we are not afraid*

Artwork created by Estefanía Rivera Cortés for Papel Machete as part of the #rickyrenuncia movement in 2019. Image courtesy of AgitArte.

*Si el gobierno aguanta las ayudas,  
el pueblo las libera /  
If the government withholds aid,  
the people will free it*

Artists from AgitArte and Papel Machete and those in solidarity with Puerto Rico create artwork and posters that provide a counter narrative to contest the dominant and inaccurate media coverage of Puerto Rico and other working-class struggles around the world. Image by Estefanía Rivera Cortés for AgitArte.



# Maps Not Manifestos

Kathryn McKinney



Community members tour the community garden at World Garden Commons tended by Growing Together during the Welcoming Week celebrations. The event included a meal prepared with produce from the garden, garden tours and local entertainment. World Garden Commons at Rabanus Park is the pilot site of The Fargo Project, in Fargo, North Dakota. Photo by Amu Production, 2016.

IT HAS BEEN 46 YEARS since Joseph Beuys published his manifesto of Social Sculpture, / *AM SEARCHING FOR FIELD CHARACTER* (1973), stating straight-off:

Only on condition of a radical widening of definition will it be possible for art and activities related to art to provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deadline: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART.

This move to understand society itself and social transformation as works of art has inspired countless artists since, and even before (Mierle Laderman Ukeles wrote her own *Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969!* over five years prior.) Despite nearly 50 years of demonstration to the contrary, socially engaged art—an umbrella term for many characterizations of shaping relationships and society as a form of art—faces routine questioning and even belligerence by the art world establishment on behalf of the product obsessed art market. Artists and administrators embody the cognitive dissonance of pushing the socio-political value of artists, while asking themselves quietly, “what can art really do?” We’ve seen this pushing of ideas from the top down, effectively art campaign-style “messaging” of progressive ideas passively through aesthetic experience, fails to produce action and political change simply because it fails to demand it of the viewer, and fails first to demand it of the artist.

However, in the world outside of the international art circuit, socially engaged artists and the incorporation of artists into policy initiatives and governmental agencies, and within their communities, is gaining traction where it matters most. Ironically, it’s sometimes policy wonks and bureaucrats

who are likelier to embrace abstract notions of what art *is* and its potential, before the art world establishment. We see this in the growth of the creative placemaking field. Within communities, institutions, and the halls of government that we imagine as the defacto shapers of our social sculpture, artists have been creating meaningful, tangible, and measurable progress. This has been the focus of A Blade of Grass’ initiatives since conceiving of the Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art, now entering its sixth year, and basis of its newly released online guide to Municipal-Artist Partnerships, a free resource for artists and city agencies to understand the stakes and opportunities of this work.

Developed as a “relationship guide,” Municipal-Artist Partnerships emphasizes the relational, not transactional, quality of this artwork. The guide offers artists and their counterparts within a city agency valuable insight through tools, examples, and exercises designed to get each to see the work through the perspective of the other, test their assumptions and understanding, and enter these partnerships with better awareness of their dynamics, requirements, and potential. Within these arrangements, there are no passive “viewers” to the work, only collaborators within it. The outcomes can be sizable, whether it’s transforming the landscape and public space of a city, healing and moving beyond trauma and prejudice within systems, diverting youth from prison, optimizing residents’ access and experience with city services, or the wellbeing of those providing them. With each successful instance of sculpting a more sustainable, equitable, and just society, audiences are transformed into artists and political agents themselves. As Beuys continues in his manifesto, “This most modern art discipline – Social Sculpture/ Social Architecture will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism. Only then [...] would democracy be fully

Art is a seemingly low stakes space that invites imagination, empathy, and action implemented over time, with the right context and community; the stakes rise until they become real world changes.



realized.” If mandating that everyone must be an artist feels a bit undemocratic, then maybe the more consensual version of social sculpture is that anyone who wants to be is an artist.

If you’re an artist, social engagement could be considered another dimension to work with: from 2D to 3D, to no longer representative, but reality. If you’re not an artist, but have an idea for some project that manifests in experimentation and boundary pushing to effect change to our institutions and landscapes, maybe you are an artist? Laurie Rojas points out in a 2010 *Chicago Art Magazine* essay, “...the problem is not the lack of conversation, it is the lack of a body politic that has the ability to mobilize for progressive social transformation...” This is precisely the aim of A Blade of Grass. We believe art, as a proposition, allows for distinct and important methods of change. A seemingly low stakes space that invites imagination, empathy, and action implemented over time, with the right context and community; the stakes rise until they become real world changes. With each socially engaged art work, each artist embedded within a sanitation department or police department, forcing the needle on more equitable, sustainable power dynamics and systems, the next art world is being built. It will include beautiful things, and tragic things, and well designed things, but these things will not exist to make all the ugly, disturbing, and poorly designed aspects of our society more palatable. It will replace them.

*Kathryn McKinney is the Head of Content & Communications at A Blade of Grass.*

*My Park, My Pool, My City* is a three-year artistic residency in partnership with the Austin’s Parks and Recreation Aquatics Division which began in 2017, activating and amplifying civic engagement around the future of Austin’s city pools. Photo by Jonica Moore.



If you’re interested in the radical potential of Municipal-Artist Partnerships to transform society, visit:

[www.municipal-artist.org](http://www.municipal-artist.org)

The site is free and publicly available, created by A Blade of Grass and Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, and made possible with support from Our Town, the National Endowment for the Arts’ creative placemaking grants program, and the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation. Designed and developed by Partner & Partners.







# For Techno-Colored Who Imagined When Black History

BLACK SCI-FI WRITER SAMUEL DELANY SAYS, “images of tomorrow,” are what black people need most. Powerful black images are the seeds of transformative black stories—stories black folks can identify with, believe in, and heal through. Imaginative, authentic narratives about black lives and radical afrofutures disrupt stereotypes and shift perceptions. We know a story holds power when we want to become a part of it, engage with its characters, remember the journey through our own eyes and experiences. Such stories are immersive by nature. To these alchemical ends and technological means, black artists and storytellers working in 3-D design and immersive technology are leveling up on tools for social change and our souls’ survival.

As we witness the turn of the decade, many projects emerging from the nexus of art and technology offer a glimpse into the ever-evolving terrain of art and social practice. These projects explore new strategies for creative resistance while redefining what art and story can look, feel, and sound like across multiple platforms. This includes innovative work from multidisciplinary fields like digital humanities, immersive storytelling, design justice, and afrofuturism.

# Girls Afrofutures Wasn't Enough

Li Sumpter

Octavia E. Butler says it is our<sup>1</sup> destiny to, “take root among the stars.”

Octavia believed humanity’s destiny is our choice, by design. I strive to be in the same orbit with fellow humans who hold similar hopes for the future of the planet in the face of urgent ecological crisis. When it comes to my art and approach to collaboration, this alignment is essential to ensure the growth of my practice and its impact within my arts ecosystem. I try to surround myself with other artists, storytellers, makers, dreamers, designers who understand the power of myth and radical imagination. These symbiotic connections and collective resources exist as a creative network activated across disciplines and diverse communities. What follows is a snapshot of black stars constellating in my cosmos, a few glowing nodes in my network I’d like to shout out and show some love. The epicenter of my multiverse is rooted in my hometown of Philly, Planet Earth.

1. "Our" refers to "Earthseed," what Octavia Butler called humanity in *Parable of the Sower*.

## The Colored<sup>2</sup> Girls Museum — FIRST TIME EVER I SAW YOUR FACE

When it comes to holding safe and sacred space for black girls and women, The Colored Girls Museum (TCGM) in Germantown, Philadelphia has made this Her die-hard mission. TCGM is a 130-year old historic home that has been so lovingly and purposefully transformed into a public space of community ritual in “protection, praise, and grace of the ordinary colored girl.” Under the leadership of Vashti Dubois, the Museum uplifts images and stories of black and brown girls and women in ways the world and our own communities of color have rarely seen.

In 2019, I was an exhibiting artist in a group show TCGM co-curated for the Leeway Foundation at Moore College of Art and Design, where I also teach curatorial studies and afrofuturism. This year, I’ll be working with Vashti and a Philly-based national team on an immersive tech portrait project called *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*. Augmented reality, green screen, and 360 volumetric video are among the tools that will bring portrait artists, their subjects, and their stories to life for Museum visitors of all ages and abilities.



Executive Director and founder Vashti DuBois sits in front of The Colored Girls Museum. The museum honors the stories, experiences, and history of ordinary Colored Girls. Image courtesy of The Colored Girls Museum.

2. To Vashti DuBois the term "colored" means, "the act of coloring—the verb itself refers to how the world consistently takes its crayons and colors black women and girls whatever they want. They color us too loud. Color us as too aggressive, as needy not in need of protection. They just color us. And then the colored girl will take that same crayon and begin to color herself and her people."



Filmmaker M. Asli Dukan uses the stories of five generations of her matrilineal legacy to transmit the experience of healing as a form of liberation in *The Healing Box*. Image courtesy of M. Asli Dukan.

## M. Asli Dukan — THE HEALING BOX

M. Asli Dukan lives and creates in Philly where her practice is based. Her current project *The Healing Box* is an interactive, multimedia project inspired by the sci-fi story *Dune* and five generations of voices from Dukan’s own matrilineal legacy from the 1800s Caribbean to 21st century United States. *The Healing Box* turns a device intended to inflict pain and trauma into a tool of remembrance and healing. Through “a multicolored light display and a series of sound designed, audio montages” participants are enveloped in a sensory experience of survival, resilience, and memory recall. This project is part one from Dukan’s forthcoming *Maria Trilogy*. The second and third parts address “themes of work and love, and add video and virtual reality to their forms.”

I first met Asli when she was shooting for her documentary on afrofuturism some years ago. We share a blerdy passion for the *Dune* mythology, and are both mining and re-membling personal ancestry through speculative artifacts and interactive installation. Most recently we’ve crossed paths in a popular maker space in Philly called NextFab Studios. Utilizing new technologies to bring lost and forgotten, untold and still unfolding stories into “mixed” or multiple realities connects Vashti, Asli, and I, and our respective projects, within this same arts ecosystem. Creating immersive narrative experiences is a viable path we’ve all chosen to expand the possibilities of our work, and the radius of our impact in Philly and beyond. In the process, we’re also transcending the limitations of our current skill sets and scopes of knowledge.

## Wangechi Mutu — *THE NEWONES, WILL FREE US*

When sharing her inspiration for the current portrait project at TCGM, Vashti recalled a visit to a local Philadelphia institution where she saw paintings of wealthy white men hung high on the walls. Visitors had to “look up” to them upon entering a room, creating an immediate dynamic of power, respect, and, even, intimidation. Vashti’s memory made me think of the recent work of one of the brightest stars of modern mythmaking I’ve ever had the pleasure to encounter.

Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu is making new myths and monuments that humans of color (and the rest of humanity) can (and literally, *must*) look up to. Across many world mythologies, the black woman represents the Creatrix of life and symbol of Mother Nature. Through her groundbreaking façade commissioned by The Met entitled, *The NewOnes, will free Us*, Mutu conjures spells of power and protection, hope and liberation for women across time, space, and art history. Informed by ancient caryatids and supported by 3-D design, these larger-than-life female figures belong to a speculative future imagined through Mutu’s mind’s eye. Making space for the lost and displaced, *The NewOnes* hold high court and stand watch for “us” in the real world, from what is easily considered *the* most iconic institution of arts and culture across the globe.

I first met Wangechi while working at the New Museum during the run of *Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti*. In the almost 20 years since our paths first crossed, Mutu remains a Morning Star to me—always shining a light of hope, pointing black folks, women, and the archetypal Other, towards True North. If our destiny is to take root among the stars, Mutu is leading the way in quantum leaps and bounds. Her thoughtful execution of The Met commission elegantly succeeds in subverting recurring images and motifs of women in service and submission in classical art and architecture that spans millennia. While *The NewOnes* stand as temporary monuments to the strength, resilience, and regality of the female body, they also speak proudly and loudly to humanity’s urgent call to save us from extinction and planetary destruction.



Photos by Garrett Ziegler



Wangechi Mutu’s sculpture, *The Seated III*, 2019, overlooks from the façade of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo by Allison Meier. Edited and cropped from original.

## Li Sumpter — GRAFFITI IN THE GRASS

Like Vashti, Asli, and Wangechi, by design, I choose to put girls and women of color at the center of my stories about the art of survival, a concept at the core of my multidisciplinary practice. Roxi RedMoon, a young heroine of African and Indigenous descent, is the heart of *Graffiti in the Grass*, my immersive transmedia project. *Graffiti* utilizes escape room, graphic novel, mixtape and mobile app to connect participants/users to Roxi's existential struggle and her quantum quest through time and space. This story and my other MythMedia and *Escape Artist* projects are strongly informed by my doctoral research on apocalyptic narratives and archetypal patterns recurring across media landscapes, the natural environment and human consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

The Apocalypse Complex (aka Sarah Connor Syndrome) is one such pattern and pathology. I describe it as an archetypal algorithm of birth, death, and rebirth that influences psychic life and material reality. Like many living in her time (c. 2045), Roxi RedMoon suffers from anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation brought on by the shadow of the Apocalypse Complex. While facing unthinkable challenges of ecological and societal collapse, Roxi is also charged with finding her missing sister and saving her community from cosmic annihilation. But first, Roxi must dig deep to overcome the shadow of her own soul before she can begin the journey to help the ones she loves.

In this apocalyptic multiverse, black and Indigneous women are not only the heroines of the human race, they are also the saviors of their own precious souls. Project participants experience Roxi's journey while also learning practical, holistic survival skills for mind, body, and spirit. Vashti has invited me to playtest



An interactive, transmedia project, *Graffiti in the Grass* promotes creative resistance and community readiness through an apocalyptic myth set in future Philadelphia. Image courtesy of Li Sumpter.



Artist Li Sumpter leads an *Escape Artist Initiative* workshop, a community-based project exploring the art of survival and creative resilience. Photo courtesy of Li Sumpter.

immersive story elements from *Graffiti in the Grass* in The Colored Girls Museum's physical and virtual spaces. This collaboration has granted me access to an experimental platform equipped with state-of-the-art resources unlocking the power to push my speculative story beyond the realms of myth and media and into real-world dimensions.

Who speaks for us? Who tells our stories? Who builds our worlds? Who will remember us when we're gone? I strive to be in good company or at least in close orbit, with the likes of Vashti, Asli, Wangechi and others asking and answering similar questions at the crossroads of art, race, access, and technology. Wangechi says the characters of her story are, "activists and environmentalists who present a different approach for the future, because none of the amazing works of art and language and theater that we've created throughout the history of humanity will matter if we're not here as a species." Facts!

No matter race, gender, faith, or discipline, artists, storytellers, designers, educators, and activists engaged in visionary, generative social justice work are all connected through independent acts of world building. Whether we know it or not, we are in simultaneous co-creation of the "big picture," the next new reality. We are collectively making new myths and Techno-colored constellations of image and media that show us just how dark or luminous humanity's futures can be. The field of imagination is both the frontline and ground zero in the battle for our brightest tomorrow. We must choose our tools of change wisely and always with hope in our hearts. Our destiny is our choice, by design.

3. My dissertation *Apocalyptic Soul: Seeing Through Image in the Age of End Time* further explores these concepts in mythology and depth psychology.

# Gratitude

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