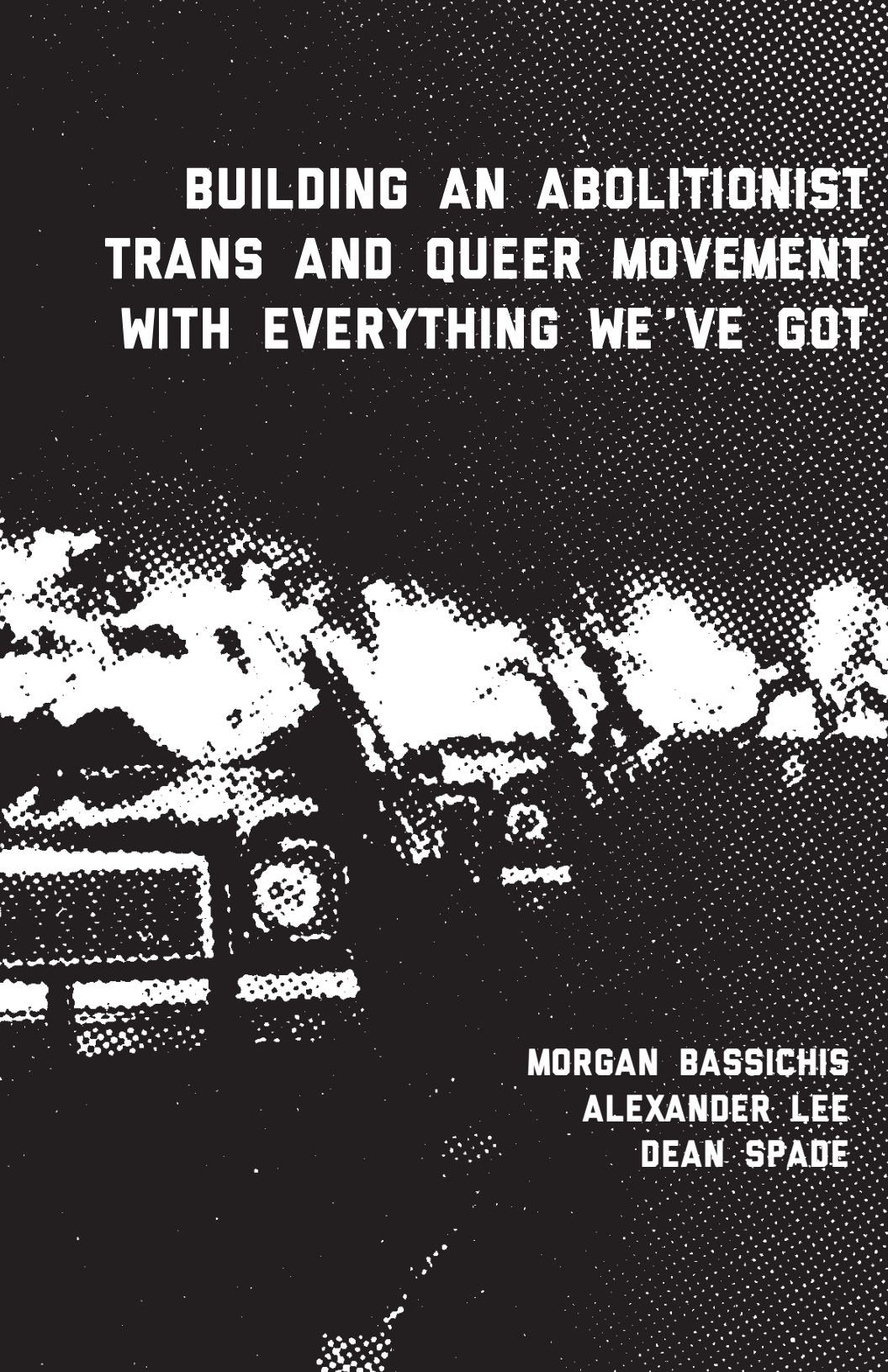
BUILDING AN ABOLITIONIST TRANS AND QUEER MOVEMENT WITH EVERYTHING WE'VE GOT



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As we write this, queer and trans people across the United States and in many parts of the world have just celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. On that fateful night back in June 1969, sexual and gender outsiders rose up against ongoing brutal police violence in an inspiring act of defiance. These early freedom fighters knew all too well that the NYPD—"New York's finest"—were the frontline threat to queer and trans survival. Stonewall was the culmination of years of domination, resentment, and upheaval in many marginalized communities coming to a new consciousness of the depth of violence committed by the government against poor people, people of color, women, and queer people both within US borders and around the world. The Stonewall Rebellion, the mass demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, and the campaign to

free imprisoned Black-liberation activist Assata Shakur were all powerful examples of a groundswell of energy demanding an end to the "business as usual" of US terror during this time.

Could these groundbreaking and often unsung activists have imagined that only forty years later the "official" gay rights agenda would be largely pro-police, pro-prisons, and pro-war—exactly the forces they worked so hard to resist? Just a few decades later, the most visible and well-funded arms of the "LGBT movement" look much more like a corporate strategizing session than a grassroots social justice movement. There are countless examples of this dramatic shift in priorities. What emerged as a fight against racist, anti-poor, and anti-queer police violence now works hand in hand with local and federal law enforcement agencies—district attorneys are asked to speak at trans rallies, cops march in Gay Pride parades. The agendas of prosecutors—those who lock up our family, friends, and lovers—and many queer and trans organizations are becoming increasingly similar, with sentence- and police-enhancing legislation at the top of the priority list. Hate crimes legislation is tacked on to multi-billion dollar "defense" bills to support US military domination in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Despite the rhetoric of an "LGBT community," transgender and gender-non-conforming people are repeatedly abandoned and marginalized in the agendas and priorities of our "lead" organizations—most recently in the 2007 gutting of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of gender identity protections. And as the rate of people (particularly poor queer and trans people of color) without steady jobs, housing, or healthcare continues to rise, and health and social services continue to be cut, those dubbed the leaders of the "LGBT movement" insist that marriage rights are the way to redress the inequalities in our communities.

For more and more queer and trans people, regardless of marital status, there is no inheritance, no health benefits from employers, no legal immigration status, and no state protection of our relationship to our children. Four decades after queer and trans people took to the streets throwing heels, bottles, bricks, and anything else we had to ward off police, the official word is that, except for being able to get married and fight in the military,[2] we are pretty much free, safe, and equal. And those of us who are not must wait our turn until the "priority" battles are won by the largely white, male, upper-class lawyers and lobbyists who know better than us.[3]

Fortunately, radical queer and trans organizing for deep transformation has also grown alongside this "trickle-down"[4] brand of "equality"

politics mentioned above. Although there is no neat line between official gay "equality" politics on the one hand, and radical "justice" politics on the other, it is important to draw out some of the key distinctions in how different parts of our movements today are responding to the main problems that queer and trans people face. This is less about creating false dichotomies between "good" and "bad" approaches, and more about clarifying the actual impact that various strategies have, and recognizing that alternative approaches to the "official" solutions are alive, are politically viable, and are being pursued by activists and organizations around the United States and beyond. In the first column, we identify some of these main challenges; in the second, we summarize what solutions are being offered by the well-resourced[5] segments of our movement; and in the third, we outline some approaches being used by more radical and progressive queer and trans organizing to expand possibilities for broad-based, social-justice solutions to these same problems.

The Current Landscape

BIG PROBLEMS	"OFFICIAL" SOLUTIONS	TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES
Queer and trans people, poor people, people of color, and immigrants have minimal access to quality healthcare	Legalize same-sex marriage to allow people with health benefits from their jobs to share with same-sex partners	Strengthen Medicaid and Medicare; win universal healthcare; fight for transgender health benefits; end deadly medical neglect of people in state custody
Queer and trans people experience regular and often fatal violence from partners, family members, community members, employers, law enforcement, and institutional officials	Pass hate crimes legislation to increase prison sentences and strengthen local and federal law enforcement; collect statistics on rates of violence; collaborate with local and federal law enforcement to prosecute hate violence and domestic violence	Build community relationships and infrastructure to support the healing and transformation of people who have been impacted by interpersonal and intergenerational violence; join with movements addressing root causes of queer and trans premature death, including police violence, imprisonment, poverty, immigration policies, and lack of healthcare and housing

BIG PROBLEMS	"OFFICIAL" SOLUTIONS	TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES
Queer and trans members of the military experience violence and discrimination	Eliminate bans on participation of gays and lesbians in US military	Join with war resisters, radical veterans, and young people to oppose military intervention, occupation, and war abroad and at home, and demand the reduction/elimination of "defense" budgets
Queer and trans people are targeted by an unfair and punitive immigration system	Legalize same-sex marriage to allow same-sex international couples to apply for legal residency for the non–US citizen spouse	End the use of immigration policy to criminalize people of color, exploit workers, and maintain the deadly wealth gap between the United States and the Global South; support current detainees and end ICE raids, deportations, and police collaboration
Queer and trans families are vulnerable to legal intervention and separation from the state, institutions, and/or non-queer people	Legalize same sex marriage to provide a route to "legalize" families with two parents of the same sex; pass laws banning adoption discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation	Join with struggles of queer/trans and non-queer/trans families of color, imprisoned parents and youth, native families, poor families, military families, and people with disabilities to win community and family self-determination and the right to keep kids, parents, and other family members in their families and communities
Institutions fail to recognize family connections outside of heterosexual marriage in contexts like hospital visitation and inheritance	Legalize same-sex marriage to formally recognize same-sex partners in the eyes of the law	Change policies like hospital visitation to recognize a variety of family structures, not just opposite-sex and same-sex couples; abolish inheritance and demand radical redistribution of wealth and an end to poverty

BIG PROBLEMS	"OFFICIAL" SOLUTIONS	TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES
Queer and trans people are disproportionately policed, arrested, and imprisoned, and face high rates of violence in state custody from officials as well as other imprisoned or detained people	Advocate for "cultural competency" training for law enforcement and the construction of queer and trans-specific and "gender-responsive" facilities; create written policies that say that queer and trans people are equal to other people in state custody; stay largely silent on the high rates of imprisonment in queer and trans communities, communities of color, and poor communities	Build ongoing, accountable relationships with and advocate for queer and trans people who are locked up to support their daily well-being, healing, leadership, and survival; build community networks of care to support people coming out of prison and jail; collaborate with other movements to address root causes of queer and trans imprisonment; work to abolish prisons, establish community support for people with disabilities and eliminate medical and psychatric institutionalization, and provide permanent housing rather than shelter beds for all people without homes

I. How Did We Get Here?

The streams of conservative as well as more progressive and radical queer and trans politics developed over time and in the context of a rapidly changing political, economic, and social landscape. Although we can't offer a full history of how these different streams developed and how the more conservative one gained national dominance, we think it is important to trace the historical context in which these shifts occurred. *To chart a different course for our movements, we need to understand the road we've traveled.* In particular, we believe that there are two major features of the second half of the twentieth century that shaped the context in which the queer and trans movement developed: (1) the active resistance and challenge by radical movement to state violence, and subsequent systematic backlash,[7] and (2) the massive turmoil and transformation of the global economy.[8] Activists and scholars use a range of terms to describe this era in which power, wealth, and oppression were transformed to respond to these two significant "crises"—including neoliberalism, the "New World Order," empire, globalization, free market democracy, or late capitalism.

Each term describes a different aspect or "take" on the current historical moment that we are living in.

It is important to be clear that *none of the strategies of the "New World Order" are new.* They might work faster, use new technologies, and recruit the help of new groups, but they are not new. Oppressive dynamics in the United States are as old as the colonization of this land and the founding of a country based on slavery and genocide. However, they have taken intensified, tricky forms in the past few decades—particularly because our governments keep telling us those institutions and practices have been "abolished." There were no "good old days" in the United States—just times in which our movements and our communities were stronger or weaker, and times when we used different cracks in the system as opportunities for resistance. All in all, we might characterize the past many decades as a time in which policies and ideas were promoted by powerful nations and institutions (such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund) to destroy the minimal safety nets set up for vulnerable people, dismantle the gains made by social movements, and redistribute wealth, resources, and life changes upward—away from the poor and toward the elite.[9]

Below are some of the key tactics that the United States and others have used in this most recent chapter of our history:

• Pull Yourself Up by Your Bootstraps, Again

The US government and its ally nations and institutions in the Global North helped pass laws and policies that made it harder for workers to organize into unions; destroyed welfare programs and created the image of people on welfare as immoral and fraudulent; and created international economic policies and trade agreements that reduced safety nets, worker rights, and environmental protections, particularly for nations in the Global South. Together, these efforts have dismantled laws and social programs meant to protect people from poverty, violence, sickness, and other harms of capitalism.

> **EXAMPLE:** In the early 1990s, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented by the United States under Democratic President Clinton to make it easier for corporations to do business across borders between the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Unfortunately, by allowing corporations to outsource their labor much more cheaply, the agreement also led to the loss

of hundreds of thousands of US jobs and wage depression even in "job receiving" countries.[10] Additionally, human rights advocates have documented widespread violations of workers rights since NAFTA, including "favoritism toward employer-controlled unions; firings for workers' organizing efforts; denial of collective bargaining rights; forced pregnancy testing; mistreatment of migrant workers; life-threatening health and safety conditions"; and other violations of the right to freedom of association, freedom from discrimination, and the right to a minimum wage.[11] Loss of jobs in the United States reduced the bargaining power of workers, now more desperate for wages then ever, and both wages and benefits declined, with many workers now forced to work as "temps" or part-time with no benefits or job security.

EXAMPLE: In 1996, President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which effectively dismantled what existed of a welfare state—creating a range of restrictive and targeting measures that required work, limited aid, and increased penalties for welfare recipients. The federal government abdicated its responsibility to provide minimal safety nets for poor and working-class people, using the rhetoric of "personal responsibility" and "work" to justify the exploitation and pain caused by capitalism and racism. Sexist, racist images of poor people as immoral, fraudulent drug addicts fueled these policy changes. Since then, different cities have adopted local measures to gut economic safety nets for poor, homeless, and working-class people. In San Francisco, Mayor Newsom's notorious 2002 "Care Not Cash" program slashed welfare benefits for homeless people, insisting that benefits given to the homeless were being spent on "drugs and alcohol."[12]

- **Scapegoating**

The decrease in manufacturing jobs and the gutting of social safety nets for the poor and working class created a growing class of people who were marginally employed and housed, and forced into criminalized economies such as sex work and the drug trade. This class of people was blamed for the poverty and inequity they faced—labeled drug dealers, welfare queens, criminals, and hoodlums—and were used to justify harmful policies that expanded violence and harm. At the same time, criminal penalties for behaviors associated with poverty, like drug use, sleeping outside,

graffiti, and sex work have increased in many parts the United States, and resources for policing these kinds of "crimes" has also increased.

> **EXAMPLE:** In the 1990s, states across the United States began to sign into law so-called "Three Strikes" measures that mandated standard, long (often life) sentences for people convicted of three felonies, many including non-violent offenses. California's law has resulted in sentences of twenty-five years or more for people convicted of things like shoplifting. The popularity of Three Strikes laws have been fueled by a growing cultural obsession with criminality and punishment that relies on images of violent and dangerous "career criminals" while functioning to imprison enormous numbers of low-income people and people of color whose behaviors are the direct results of economic insecurity.

> **EXAMPLE:** Under President Clinton's 1996 welfare reforms, anyone convicted of a drug-related crime is automatically banned for life from receiving cash assistance and food stamps. Some states have since opted out of this ban, but for people living in fifteen states, this draconian measure presents nearly insurmountable barriers to becoming self-sufficient. Unable to receive cash assistance and subject to job discrimination because of their criminal histories, many people with drug-related convictions go back into the drug trade as the only way to earn enough to pay the rent and put food on the table. The lifetime welfare ban has been shown to particularly harm women and their children.[13]

• Fear-Mongering

The government and corporate media used racist, xenophobic, and misogynist fear-mongering to distract us from increasing economic disparity and a growing underclass in the United States and abroad. The War on Drugs in the 1980s and the Bush Administration's War on Terror, both of which are ongoing, created internal and external enemies ("criminals" and "terrorists") to blame for and distract from the ravages of racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism. In exchange, these enemies (and anyone who looked like them) could be targeted with violence and murder. During this time, the use of prisons, policing, detention, and surveillance skyrocketed as the government declared formal war against all those who it marks as "criminals" or "terrorists."

EXAMPLE: In the 1980s, the US government declared a "War on Drugs" and drastically increased mandatory sentences for violating drug prohibition laws. It also created new prohibitions for accessing public housing, public benefits, and higher education for people convicted of drug crimes. The result was the imprisonment of over one million people a year, the permanent marginalization and disenfranchisement for people convicted, and a new set of military and foreign policy intervention justifications for the United States to take brutal action in Latin America.

EXAMPLE: Following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, politicians manipulated the American public's fear and uncertainty to push through a range of new laws and policies justified by a declared "War on Terror." New legislation like the PATRIOT Act, the Immigrant Registration Act, and the Real ID Act, as well as new administrative policies and practices, increased the surveillance state, reduced even the most basic rights and living standards of immigrants, and turned local police, schoolteachers, hospital workers, and others into immigration enforcement officers.

- **The Myth That Violence and Discrimination Are Just About "Bad" Individuals**

Discrimination laws and hate crimes laws encourage us to understand oppression as something that happens when individuals use bias to deny someone a job because of race or sex or some other characteristic, or beat up or kill someone because of such a characteristic. This way of thinking, sometimes called the "perpetrator perspective,"[14] makes people think about racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism in terms of individual behaviors and bad intentions rather than wide-scale structural oppression that often operates without some obvious individual actor aimed at denying an individual person an opportunity. The violence of imprisoning millions of poor people and people of color, for example, can't be adequately explained by finding one nasty racist individual, but instead requires looking at a whole web of institutions, policies, and practices that make it "normal" and "necessary" to warehouse, displace, discard, and annihilate poor people and people of color. Thinking about violence and oppression as the work of "a few bad apples" undermines our ability to analyze our conditions *systemically* and *intergenerationally*, and to therefore organize for systemic change.

This narrow way of thinking about oppression is repeated in law, policy, the media, and nonprofits.

EXAMPLE: Megan's Laws are statutes that require people convicted of sexual offenses to register and that require this information be available to the public. These laws have been passed in jurisdictions around the country in the last two decades, prompted by and generating public outrage about child sexual abuse (CSA). Studies estimate that 1 in 3 people raised as girls and 1 in 6 people raised as boys were sexually abused as children, as a result of intergenerational trauma, community- and state-sanctioned abusive norms, and alienation. Rather than resourcing comprehensive programs to support the healing of survivors and transformation of people who have been sexually abusive, or interrupt the family and community norms that contribute to the widespread abuse of children, Megan's Laws have ensured that people convicted of a range of sexual offenses face violence, the inability to find work or a place to live, and severely reduced chances of recovery and healing. Despite the limited or nonexistent deterrent effect of such laws, they remain the dominant "official" approach to the systemic problems of CSA.[15]

EXAMPLE: As we write this, the Matthew Shepard Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act has recently passed in the US Senate, and if signed into law would give $10 million to state and local law enforcement agencies, expand federal law enforcement power focused on hate crimes, and add the death penalty as a possible punishment for those convicted. This bill is heralded as a victory for transgender people because it will make gender identity an included category in Federal Hate Crimes law. Like Megan's Law, this law and the advocacy surrounding it (including advocacy by large LGBT nonprofit organizations) focus attention on individuals who kill people because of their identities. These laws frame the problem of violence in our communities as one of individual "hateful" people, when in reality, trans people face short life-spans because of the enormous systemic violence in welfare systems, shelters, prisons, jails, foster care, juvenile punishment systems, and immigration, and the inability to access basic survival resources. These laws do nothing to prevent our deaths, they just use our deaths to expand a system that endangers our lives and places a chokehold on our communities.[16]

- **Undermining Transformative Organizing**

The second half of the twentieth century saw a major upsurge in radical and revolutionary organizing in oppressed communities in the United States and around the world. This powerful organizing posed a significant threat to the legitimacy of US power and capitalist empire more broadly, and therefore needed to be contained. These movements were undermined by two main strategies: First, the radical movements of the 1960s and '70s were criminalized, with the US government using tactics of imprisonment, torture, sabotage, and assassination to target and destroy groups like the Black Panthers, American Indian Movement, and Young Lords, among others. Second, the growth of the nonprofit sector has seen social movements professionalizing, chasing philanthropic dollars, separating into "issue areas," and moving toward social services and legal reform projects rather than radical projects aimed at the underlying causes of poverty and injustice.[17] These developments left significant sections of the radical left traumatized and decimated, wiping out a generation of revolutionaries and shifting the terms of resistance from revolution and transformation to inclusion and reform, prioritizing state- and foundation-sanctioned legal reforms and social services over mass organizing and direct action.

EXAMPLE: The FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) is a notorious example of the US government's use of infiltration, surveillance, and violence to overtly target dissent and resistance. COINTELPRO was exposed when internal government documents were revealed that detailed the outrageous work undertaken by the federal government to dismantle resistance groups in the 1960s and '70s. Although the program was dissolved under that name, the tactics continued and can be seen today in current controversies about wiretapping and torture as well as in the USA PATRIOT Act. Overt action to eliminate resistance and dissent here is as old as the European colonization of North America.[18]

EXAMPLE: In the wake of decades of radical organizing by people in women's prisons and activists on the outside decrying systemic medical neglect, sexual violence, and the destruction of family bonds, California legislators in 2006 proposed a so-called "gender responsive corrections" bill that would allow people in women's prisons to live with their children and receive increased social services. To make this plan

work, the bill called for millions of dollars in new prison construction. The message of "improving the lives of women prisoners" and creating more "humane" prisons—rhetoric that is consistently used by those in power to distract us from the fundamentally violent conditions of a capitalist police state—appealed to liberal, well-intentioned feminist researchers, advocates, and legislators. Anti-prison organizations such as Oakland-based Justice Now and others working in solidarity with the resounding sentiment of people in women's prisons, pointed out that this strategy was actually just a back door to creating 4,500 new prison beds for women in California, yet again expanding opportunities to criminalize poor women and transgender people in one of the nation's most imprisoning states.[19]

• The Hero Mindset

The United States loves its heroes and its narratives—Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches, "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," streets "paved with gold," the rugged frontiersman, the benevolent philanthropist, and Obama as savior, among others. These narratives hide the uneven concentration of wealth, resources, and opportunity among different groups of people—the ways in which not *everybody* can just do anything if they put their minds to it and work hard enough. In the second half of the twentieth century, this individualistic and celebrity-obsessed culture had a deep impact on social movements and how we write narratives. Stories of mass struggle became stories of individuals overcoming great odds. The rise of the nonprofit as a key vehicle for social change bolstered this trend, giving incentives to charismatic leaders (often executive directors, often people with privilege) to frame struggles in ways that prioritize symbolic victories (big court cases, sensationalistic media coverage) and ignore the daily work of building a base and a movement for the long haul. This trend also compromises the accountability of leaders and organizations to their constituencies, and devalues activism in the trenches.

EXAMPLE: Rosa Parks is one of the most well-known symbols of resistance during the African American Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. She is remembered primarily for "sparking" the Montgomery Bus Boycott and as the "mother of the civil rights movement."[20] In popular mythology, Ms. Parks was an ordinary woman who simply decided one day that she would not give up her seat to a white person in a "lonely act of defiance."[21] In reality, Ms. Parks was

an experienced civil rights activist who received political education and civil disobedience training at the well-known leftist Highlander Folk School, which still exists today. Ms. Parks's refusal to give up her seat was far from a "lonely act," but was rather just one in a series of civil disobediences by civil rights leaders to target segregation in public services. The Civil Rights Movement of the period was a product of the labor and brilliance of countless New-World African enslaved people, African American people, and their allies working since before the founding of the United States, not simply attributable to any one person. The portrayal of mass struggles as individual acts hides a deeper understanding of oppression and the need for broad resistance.

EXAMPLE: Oprah's well-publicized giveaways[22]—as well as a range of television shows that feature "big wins" such as makeovers, new houses, and new cars—have helped to create the image of social change in our society as individual acts of "charity" rather than concerted efforts by mass groups of people to change relationships of power. These portrayals affirm the false idea that we live in a meritocracy in which any one individual's perseverance and hard work are the only keys needed to wealth and success. Such portrayals hide realities like the racial wealth divide and other conditions that produce and maintain inequality on a group level, ensuring that most people will not rise above or fall below their place in the economy, regardless of their individual actions. In reality, real social change that alters the relationships of power throughout history have actually come about when large groups of people have worked together toward a common goal.

Together, the tactics that we describe above function as a strategy of *counter-revolution*—an attempt to squash the collective health and political will of oppressed people, and to buy off people with privilege in order to support the status quo. This is a profoundly traumatic process that deepened centuries of pain, loss, and harm experienced by people of color, immigrants, queer and trans people, women, and others marked as "disposable." For many of us, this included losing our lives and our loved ones to the devastating government-sanctioned HIV/AIDS pandemic and ongoing attacks from family, neighbors, and government officials.

Perhaps one of the most painful features of this period has been the separating of oppressed communities and movements from one another. Even though our communities are all overlapping and our struggles for