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New York Liberation School: Study and Movement for the People's University

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I set foot on the City College of New York campus was for a protest. In March 2005, students and workers held a picket in front of a military recruiters' table at a campus career fair. The action was part of a national wave of counter-recruitment efforts responding to the expanding US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Three City College students were brutally assaulted by campus police. One had his face smashed into a concrete wall. Another—all five-feet-one-inch of her—was pinned to the ground by several guards and handcuffed. A day later, a staff member who had also participated was escorted from her desk and arrested. Calls for the activists' suspension and job termination ensued.¹

At the protest I attended soon afterward, students, workers, and neighborhood residents decried the arrests as well as narrowing access to public education, racist recruitment methods, imperialist oil wars, and the violence of policing. They also affirmed the power of collective self-defense. Speakers linked the occupations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine with repression at home. Many alluded to the City University's long, militant history, through which poor people of colors reshaped their institution and communities.² The rally generated an outcry that ultimately rescinded all charges against the “City College Four.” My first experience of educational direct action—staged amidst towering neo-Gothic buildings and rolling lawns within the inner-city Harlem neighborhood—was awe-inspiring. I knew instantly that I wanted to make a study and movement home here. One favored chant from that day—“Free CUNY!”—has resounded in my ears ever since, as both a demand and a promise.

Radical social movements at the City University of New York (CUNY) and throughout New York City were already revered in my family before I enrolled at City College in January 2006. In the early 1970s, at the dawn of the Open Admissions policy, my mother studied nursing at Hunter College while my uncle studied criminol-

1 *Democracy Now!*, “Campus Resistance: Students Stage Counter-Recruitment Protests Across the Country,” March 18, 2005, https://www.democracynow.org/2005/3/18/campus_resistance_students_stage_counter_recruitment/. See also Conor Tomás Reed, “Long Live Said,” *The New Inquiry*, October 25, 2013, <https://thenewinquiry.com/long-live-said/>.

2 The term “people of colors” invites readers to honor the vast array of hues, cultures, and histories of people who identify as African, Asian, Black, Caribbean, Indigenous, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, mixed, and beyond—across gender, sexuality, and ability spectrums—who cannot be subsumed into one color, as in “people of color,” while recognizing that our immense variations entail that no umbrella term will be inclusive enough.

ogy at John Jay College.³ Their parents had emigrated from Puerto Rico to the Bronx in the early 1950s, and the fact that their kin could now access a free public college education was cause for celebration. My father was also born and raised in the Bronx by his Irish family. In their twenties, my parents were organizers in the Ploughshares movement, a nonviolent direct-action group led by Catholic priests Philip and Daniel Berrigan. Ploughshares militants would enter government offices to pour blood on draft records. They would also hammer dents into weapons found in military silos to render them inoperable.⁴

“Before you were born,” my mother would beam at me, “you had been arrested.” Shortly after Ronald Reagan’s election in November 1980, she joined over two thousand women to surround the Pentagon in resistance to nuclear proliferation and the ever-expanding military budget.⁵ She spent ten days in jail while pregnant with me. When this Puerto Rican-Irish coalition kid was born, Philip Berrigan baptized me. My first two homes were the antiwar commune Jonah House in Baltimore, MD and the Catholic Worker–affiliated Bread and Justice House in Bremerton, WA.⁶

Several early years spent in uptown New York City with my parents and siblings first anchored me to a radical sense of home. My mother worked as a nurse at St. Vincent’s Hospital in the first and largest HIV/AIDS ward on the East Coast, at the epicenter of the epidemic.⁷ My father documented survivors’ stories of US-trained death squads in Central America.⁸ Even when my family relocated to Texas, I knew that I would return to this city. At a geographic distance for many formative years, New York City radiated as a mythical place. In this book, I have worked to desentimentalize the city while acknowledging its fecundity in the national and global imaginations as a site of concentrated influence and power, both for the wealthy and for working peoples.

When I returned to New York in 2005, the City College antiwar action was followed that by a three-day strike by the city’s Transport Workers Union. These actions demonstrated the impact that both smaller spontaneous and larger coordinated efforts could have on the public university system and on the city at large. As a City College student between 2006 and 2010, I helped to nourish a campus milieu for learning and insurgency along with other students, workers, and community advocates. This included writing for *The Paper*, a longstanding City College newspaper led by Black and Puerto Rican students. I remember City College viscerally—how it felt to enter its imposing gates after trudging up the long slope from Broadway on one side, via the even steeper route up the St. Nicholas Park steps coming from Central Harlem, or by strolling right into campus on sleepy Convent Avenue. During this time I lived in

3 Implemented in Fall 1970, the Open Admissions policy allowed every New York City high school graduate a place in one of CUNY’s two- or four-year colleges.

4 Philip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister, *The Time’s Discipline: The Beatitudes and Nuclear Resistance* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989).

5 Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: Harper, 2017), 603. See also Wesley G. Phelps, “Women’s Pentagon Action: The Persistence of Radicalism and Direct-Action Civil Disobedience in the Age of Reagan,” *Peace & Change: A Journal of Peace Research* 9, no. 3 (July 2014): 339–365.

6 Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Collection, Bread and Justice Catholic Worker House (Bremerton, Washington) Records, 1980–1982. Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University, <https://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/Mss/DDCW/DDCW-seriesW29.php/>.

7 NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, “St. Vincent’s Hospital Manhattan,” February 2021, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/st-vincents-hospital-manhattan/>.

8 Thomas F. Reed and Karen Brandow, *The Sky Never Changes: Testimonies from the Guatemalan Labor Movement* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1996).

Harlem, at 150th and Broadway. Ralph Ellison's historic residence was a block away, on Riverside Drive. Toni Cade Bambara's childhood home was a block in the other direction, on 151st Street.

The iconoclastic socialist feminist Jane Marcus was my first academic mentor.⁹ After I researched City College students' involvement in 1930s antifascist struggles and the Spanish Civil War, she urged me to learn about the college's late 1960s upheavals. It was during this period that her longtime colleague Adrienne Rich first collaborated with Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and others to teach Black and Puerto Rican students. In 1969, these students took over multiple campus buildings to create "Harlem University," aiming to transform admissions, curricula and governance, and to dismantle the boundaries between neighborhood and school. Over time, I absorbed the radical histories nestled around the campus. I returned to our library's archives frequently, feeling the protest leaflets and student newspapers hum with inherited energy. I spoke eagerly with anyone who had organized, participated in, or recalled these events. This book is the result of my experiences organizing at CUNY, diving into innumerable archives, and holding dialogues with Marcus and many others. It began to take shape seventeen years ago and has been written across multiple waves of struggle. Thousands have coauthored this book.

Coalitions, Compositions, Boomerangs

New York Liberation School chronicles how Black, Puerto Rican, and women educators and students at City College and CUNY revolutionized higher education and US social movements.¹⁰ As New York City became an epicenter of Black, Puerto Rican, and women's militancy, participants produced poetry, fiction, journalism, and communiqués that continue to animate struggles today. These CUNY students and educators rooted themselves in a formal learning institution with the aim of building enduring *counter-institutions*. In the process, they created what Rich once called "a change of world."¹¹

This narrative operates on two different registers. First, we present an interpersonal story to recount how several famous cultural workers and organizers shaped their writing and political actions through immersion in City College's Search for Education,

9 Conor Tomás Reed, "Remembering Jane Marcus: CUNY Prof Was a Tenaciously Brilliant Scholar, Activist," *The Independent*, June 9, 2015, <https://independent.org/2015/06/remembering-jane-marcus-cuny-prof-was-a-tenaciously-brilliant-scholar-activist/>.

10 This book offers a nonreductive, anti-essentialist, intersectional approach to historically situating these three social groups within and alongside each other. "Black" refers to people of the African diaspora across gender, sexuality, and ability spectrums. "Puerto Rican" refers to people from the island and its diaspora, including Nuyoricans, across gender, sexuality, and ability spectrums. "Women" refers to people who self-identify as this gender across ethnicity, sexuality, and ability spectrums. Our narrative also locates the United States of America within the geographic cosmologies of Turtle Island and Abya Yala. This book focuses on how these identities were composed, culturally expressed, and institutionalized at CUNY and in New York City by enmeshing (or opposing) one's ethnicity, gender, sexuality, abilities, economic position, and historical conjuncture with others around them.

11 Adrienne Rich, *A Change of World: Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Program.¹² We primarily focus on City College teachers Toni Cade Bambara, David Henderson, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Mina P. Shaughnessy; as well as on students Francee Covington, Samuel R. Delany, Guillermo Morales, Louis Reyes Rivera, Assata Shakur, Paul B. Simms, and Sekou Sundiata.¹³ Second, we offer an institutional analysis of how public universities like CUNY and the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) became key sites of US state counterinsurgency aimed at suppressing liberation projects in New York City, the United States, and the US-colonized territory of Puerto Rico. These two threads illuminate how, through their *coalitions*, educators and students worked *compositionally* to desegregate and decolonize the largest US public urban university along with its surrounding geographies. *New York Liberation School* is ultimately a historical *boomerang*, a dynamic relation flung across generations to propel our collective energies toward freedom.

Coalitions

In dialogue with feminist scholars of colors, this book encourages a practice of reading these City College figures *coalitionally* across the people and groups that shaped each other's lives.¹⁴ Further, it means recognizing the coalitional identities that comprise our selves. Instead of an individualized, ahistorical approach to self-identification (e.g., Black, woman, queer, working class) that narrows the focus to a sole intersecting point of *being*, thinking coalitionally reveals how identities are historically situated ways of *doing* that radiate outward, bridging and even hurtling over boundaries that claim these social parts are distinct or incommensurable.¹⁵ Coalitional identities are irreducible differences that are manifested and acted upon. People are ongoing, mutually becoming. They are more than solo human forms. As Audre Lorde described herself, beyond the

12 Created at City College in 1965, and then extended through community pressure to all CUNY senior colleges in 1967, SEEK prepared Black and Puerto Rican high school students for college by providing noncredit preparatory courses, stipends, and social work counseling, as well as financial support through their time in college. City University of New York, "SEEK & College Discovery," *CUNY History & Mission*, <http://www.cuny.edu/academics/programs/notable/seekcd/history-mission.html/>.

13 While these teachers and students are the focus of this book, we also wish to honor the vast amount of under-recognized and under-compensated university labor done by office staff, custodians, food workers, groundskeepers, information technology workers, librarians, and beyond, as well as the socially reproductive labor outside of the university that is often unpaid and unvalued.

14 Karma Chavez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Linda Luu, "Comment from the Field: Toward Interdisciplinary Coalitions: Eunjung Kim's *Curative Violence* and Jasbir K. Puar's *The Right to Maim*," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019): 111–115.

15 While "intersectionality" has come to be recognized as an academic term in the critical race theory discipline that emerged in the mid-1980s, its roots and usage precede that. See, for example, writings and speeches of this period by Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Frances Beal, Patricia Hill Collins, Anna Julia Cooper, Ana Livia Cordero, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Nancy Cunard, Angela Y. Davis, Judy Grahn, Fannie Lou Hamer, bell hooks, Claudia Jones, Yuri Kochiyama, Meridel Le Seuer, Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez, Cherríe Moraga, Tillie Olsen, Lucy Parsons, Ricky Sherover-Marcuse, Barbara Smith, Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, among others.

For more recent key texts, see in particular: Chiara Bottici, *Anarchafeminism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022); Eve Mitchell, "I Am a Woman and a Human: A Marxist-Feminist Critique of Intersectionality Theory," *Unity & Struggle*, September 12, 2013, <http://www.unityandstruggle.org/2013/09/i-am-a-woman-and-a-human-a-marxist-feminist-critique-of-intersectionality-theory/>; Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

constrictions of a single lifetime, “Woman forever. My body, a living representation of other life older longer wiser. The mountains and valleys, trees, rocks. Sand and flowers and water and stone. Made in earth.”¹⁶ Attention to coalitional politics shows how these teachers and students integrated differences within themselves and each other, creating a practice of *integrity* that has since become imprinted upon CUNY and within popular cultures more generally.¹⁷

These coalitional identities brought people into collaboration and offered a method to commit their lives to revolutionary change. The clandestine Black Liberation Army (BLA) invited people from “all walks of life” to join their underground struggle against racial supremacy and capitalism.¹⁸ Similarly, the Puerto Rican underground group Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN) enjoined its accomplices to be *for* Puerto Rico even if they weren’t *of* Puerto Rican heritage.¹⁹ “I think of being Black not so much as an ethnic category but as an oppositional force or touchstone for looking at situations differently,” anarchist Black Panther Ashanti Alston has argued.²⁰ Considering Asian American movements of the 1960s and ’70s, the historian Daryl Maeda has likewise underscored how the “identity that they ultimately advocated was a political marker rather than an ethnic descriptor,” one that “represented opposition to racism in the United States and imperialism abroad.”²¹ For the historian Vijay Prashad, “The Third World was not a place. It was a project.”²²

Movement historians have focused on how Black Power groups forged the political radicalization of other groups. Even when scholars reflect on the Black Panther Party’s interaction with China, for example, it becomes a story of Black Power’s internationalism rather than one of transrevolutionary cross-pollination. However, the specific record of Black, Puerto Rican, feminist, queer, and disabled coalitional struggles foregrounded in this book reveals that Black political actors were also directly shaped and inspired by their accomplices. For example, Puerto Rican comrades enhanced Black liberation’s focus on US colonialism, enabling African and Caribbean decolonization movements to also implicate the US empire and its own colonial subjects. Lesbian women of colors groups like the Combahee River Collective committed to “struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about

16 Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1982), 7.

17 Lorde often referenced the word “integrity”: “In order to make integrated life choices, we must open the sluice gates in our lives, create emotional consistency. This is not to say that we act the same way, or do not change and grow, but that there is an *underlying integrity* that asserts itself in all of our actions.” See Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ann Arbor: Firebrand Books, 1988), 5. (Emphasis added.)

18 Assata Shakur, *An Autobiography* (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001), 52–53.

19 For example, Jewish-American Susan Rosenberg (John Brown Anti-Klan Committee and May 19th Organization member) and Italian Silvia Baraldini (May 19th member) contributed to FALN activities. See Ren Ellis Neyra, *The Cry of the Senses: Listening to Latinx and Caribbean Poetics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 86.

20 Ashanti Alston, “Black Anarchism,” transcript of public talk given at Hunter College, New York City on October 24, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/BlackAnarchismAshantiAlston/>.

21 Daryl Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 130.

22 Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007), xv.

sexism” and heterosexism.²³ To name this symbiotic empowerment as coalitional underscores how the Black Power movement was also influenced by Asian, Caribbean, Chicana, European, Indigenous, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, feminist, queer, and disability liberation movements, which in turn retranslated what Black Power meant in these different encounters.

Compositions

Throughout this book, we draw on the analyses of *class composition* that Autonomist Marxists developed during the urban struggles of the 1960s and ’70s, which others have recently embraced to assess the summer 2020 US abolitionist rebellions.²⁴ Using a polysemic approach, we reflect on the compositions, decompositions, and recompositions of Black, Puerto Rican, and women figures, as well as the institutions and relations in which they acted. Through their practices of writing—daydreaming, journals, class notes, outlines, drafts, revisions, publications, and circulations of words—City College educators and students rearticulated themselves and each other.²⁵ Our task in reading these compositions is not to transpose them onto our own time and places, but to ascertain how they were created so that we might translate their lessons into the present.²⁶

At its heart, this book suggests that our New York Liberation School (partly the City College campus, partly the Harlem neighborhood and beyond) became a nucleus of Black–Puerto Rican–Third World–feminist–queer–disabled–revolutionary cultures and politics that has emanated outwards for the last fifty years.²⁷ Its participants’ writings have served as *mobile liberation zones* that spread far beyond the specific context in which they emerged to teach subsequent generations new ways and meanings of strug-

23 Combahee River Collective, “Combahee River Collective Statement,” in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 19.

24 Anonymous, “The Siege of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis: An Account and Analysis,” *CrimethInc.*, June 10, 2020. <https://crimethinc.com/2020/06/10/the-siege-of-the-third-precinct-in-minneapolis-an-account-and-analysis/>; Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975); Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975); Silvia Federici and Arlen Austin, eds., *Wages for Housework: The New York Committee 1972–1977: History, Theory, Documents* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2017); David P. Palazzo, “The ‘Social Factory’ in Postwar Italian Radical Thought from Operaismo to Autonomia,” PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 2014; Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Louise Toupin and Käthe Roth, *Wages for Housework: The History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972–77* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomous Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

25 Stuart Hall notes the entwined meaning of articulation as “both ‘joining up’ (as in the limbs of the body, or an anatomical structure) and ‘giving expression to.’” See Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance” (1980), in Hall, *Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 172–221. See also Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14.

26 Gavin Arnall, “The Many Tasks of the Marxist Translator: Approaching Marxism as/in/with Translation from Antonio Gramsci to the Zapatistas,” *Historical Materialism* 30, no. 1 (February 2022): 99–132.

27 Writing about university struggles in 1960s–70s Italy, Sergio Bologna similarly argued, “[T]he best way to distort these University struggles is to pretend that they are only about the University reforms, and therefore only of interest to University workers and students. This is false—because we have seen an entire class composition coming together around the Universities.” In Wright, *Storming Heaven*, 203.

gle.²⁸ Each poem, essay, story, and novel becomes a City College/Harlem University classroom: multicentered, polyvocal, a class both ‘in itself and for itself,’ practicing freedom. On this basis, you are also students of our New York Liberation School. This book is a wrested brick, a piece of sustenance from a long-contested institution. Hold it close, then pass it on to others.

Boomerangs

Throughout the book, *boomerang* is used to describe the kinetic power through which actions that appear in one place trigger both inspiration and blowback. Various post-World War II Black radical and anticolonial literatures have emphasized this call-and-response dynamic. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” James Baldwin writes: “Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos.”²⁹ Locating the genealogy of European fascism in the horrors of its own colonial histories, Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* recalls how “the bourgeoisie is awakened by a terrific boomerang effect: the gestapos are busy, the prisons fill up, the torturers standing around the racks invent, refine, discuss.”³⁰ In his preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre describes the effect from a different vantage: “In Algeria and Angola, Europeans are massacred at sight. It is the moment of the boomerang; it is the third phase of violence; it comes back on us, it strikes us, and we do not realize . . . that it’s we that have launched it.”³¹ Following President John F. Kennedy’s November 1963 assassination, Malcolm X framed the tragedy as “chickens coming home to roost,” suggesting that the pervasive social violence that Kennedy failed to stop had ultimately been inflicted upon him.³²

The boomerang effect resounds as a phenomenon of political retribution against the masters of history.³³ The boomerang alerts us to scores to be settled and expectations to be overturned, from Baldwin’s existential disorientation to the vengeance envisioned by Césaire, Sartre, Malcolm X, and others.³⁴ In conjunction, *New York Liberation School* highlights how the moment of the boomerang also describes when militant

28 Eleanor Traylor, cited in Thabiti Lewis, “*Black People Are My Business*”: Toni Cade Bambara’s Practices of Liberation (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 37.

29 James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 19.

30 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 36.

31 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Preface,” in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 20.

32 “Malcolm X Scores US and Kennedy: Likens Slaying to ‘Chickens Coming Home to Roost,’” *New York Times*, December 2, 1963, <https://www.nytimes.com/1963/12/02/archives/malcolm-x-scores-us-and-kennedy-likens-slaying-to-chickens-coming.html/>.

33 The term “whirlwind” in Black liberation struggles suggests a broader counter-historiographical cosmology to wield across our movements. See Muhammad Ahmad, *We Will Return in the Whirlwind: Black Radical Organizations, 1960–1975* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2007); Sekou Odinga, Dhoruba Bin Wahad, and Jamal Joseph, eds., *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: From the Panther 21 to 21st-Century Revolutions* (Oakland: PM Press, 2017); Team Colors Collective, *Uses of a Whirlwind: Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States* (Chico: AK Press, 2010).

34 See Sohail Daulatzi, “Introduction: Fifty Years of the Boomerang,” in *Fifty Years of The Battle of Algiers: Past as Prologue* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

energies that erupt in one setting can project outward to others, such as when anti-state street uprisings then appear as university revolts. Anticipating this dynamic can allow us to prepare for—and proliferate—polyrhythmic insurgencies across societies, yielding a fertile ecology of movement actions.³⁵

Scales of CUNY

This book spans more than a century of City College, CUNY, and New York City history, though our overarching focus is on the years 1960–1980, the last major peak of US social and educational movements. During this period, strikes for school desegregation and curricular change altered the terrain of Black, Puerto Rican, and women’s solidarity. Neighborhoods became involved in educational activism through freedom schools. Institutional values were redefined from the kindergartens to the colleges as militants posed visionary challenges around learning strategies, equitable resources, and community control.

The outcomes of various struggles built upon or complicated each other. Energies from the 1963 March on Washington found subsequent expression in the 1964 New York City public school desegregation campaign. The 1968 Columbia University strike and Ocean Hill-Brownsville community control struggles were followed by the 1969 City College strike and Open Admissions policy of 1970. The imposition of tuition at CUNY in 1976 established conditions in 1978 for entry-level reading, writing, and math testing to assign incoming students a score and a place in the university.³⁶ Put another way, the period between the creation of the SEEK Program at City College in 1965 and the imposition of tuition at CUNY in 1976 coincides with the time between the assassination of Malcolm X (just blocks away from City College) and the 1975 fall of Saigon, the final defeat of the US in Vietnam. The flights of former City College students Guillermo Morales and Assata Shakur to exile in Cuba in 1979 preface the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan and the simultaneous end of several major US left organizations.³⁷

Today, US imperialism has restructured and rebranded itself by using neoliberal diversity to mask a counterinsurgency campaign directed at public higher education and cities.³⁸ By recentering CUNY as one of the major targets identified by neoliberalism and US imperialism, we can see why contemporary CUNY movements are imbued with a spirit of vengeance to settle a fifty-year score. CUNY is but one of many institutions key to our collective liberation that we must learn to claim from below. Comprising twenty-five colleges across five boroughs, CUNY employs over 50,000 campus workers and enrolls more than 270,000 students, mostly women (57 percent) and people of colors (79 percent) who are usually the first in their working-class im-

35 A useful caution on the “boomerang effect” can be found in Stuart Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 43–44; Jeanne Morefield, “Beyond Boomerang,” *International Politics Reviews* 8 (2020): 3–10.

36 Ira Shor, interview with the author, January 28, 2022.

37 These organizations included Black Women Organized for Action, Combahee River Collective, National Alliance of Black Feminists, and the Third World Women’s Alliance. See Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

38 Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2012).

migrant families to attend college.³⁹ CUNY also includes millions of alumni and our families.

At CUNY, we speak of the different “scales” at which “spatialized politics” are manifested. The body, home, block, community, institutions, city, region, nation, and globe are key co-constitutive sites of transformative change. In pivotal moments, people “jump scales.”⁴⁰ The interplay between ourselves and each other, our home and our neighborhoods, and the political shake-ups taking place across our city can reconfigure the country and the world (and vice versa). Jumping scales at CUNY, then, means being attentive to how the waves borne of a series of collisions between individual livelihoods, campus and community struggles, the CUNY administration, political and economic elites, a pandemic, and renewed mass uprisings might produce an oceanic transformation.

Institutional Strategies

US universities today are experiencing two divergent lines of flight.⁴¹ Along one arc, popular trends in education movement strategies and scholarship—in particular among some interpretations of Black and Indigenous radical traditions, “Critical University Studies,” and “Abolitionist University Studies”—have embraced the terms of escape, fugitivity, marronage, pessimism, and refusal of the university, often questioning it as a locus of transformation⁴² Along the other arc, scholars, administrators, and elite foundations have embraced the call for “public humanities” to reach broader communities outside the campus gates.

Both tendencies were influenced by the university upheavals and freedom learning of the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s. These projects were led by Asian, Black, Caribbean, Indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander American communities, with support from European Americans, whose predecessors helped lead a previous wave of educational

39 City University of New York, “CUNY Workforce Statistics,” <https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/hr/workforce-statistics/>; “Student Data Book (Current and Historical),” <https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/oira/institutional/data/>.

40 Neil Smith, “Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale,” *Social Text* 33 (1992): 55–81.

41 An earlier iteration of this writing appears in Conor Tomás Reed, “All Power to the Public Humanities!” *ASAP/Journal*, November 29, 2021, <https://asapjournal.com/public-humanities-and-the-arts-of-the-present-all-power-to-the-public-humanities-conor-tomas-reed/>.

42 Yulia Gilich and Tony Boardman, “Wildcat Imaginaries: From Abolition University to University Abolition,” *Critical Times* 5:1 (April 2022): 109–120; Sandy Grande, “Refusing the University,” in *Toward What Justice? Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education*, ed. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (New York: Routledge, 2018); Pedro Lebrón Ortiz, *Filosofía del cimarronaje* (Toa Baja: Editora Educación Emergente, 2020); Katherine McKittrick, “Freedom is a Secret,” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (Brooklyn: South End Press, 2007); Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn and London: Autonomedia and Minor Compositions, 2013); Moten and Harney, *All Incomplete* (London: Minor Compositions, 2021); Moten and Harney, “The University: Last Words,” in *Strike MoMA Reader*, 2021, <https://www.strikemoma.org/reader/>; Madhi Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning with Grassroots Cultures* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998); “Maroon University,” Social Justice Initiative, University of Illinois Chicago, Summer 2021, <https://sji.uic.edu/maroonu/>; Frank Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2020).

and social rebellions between the 1910s and the 1940s.⁴³ From 1960 onward, public college sit-ins and strikes—from Greensboro to Berkeley to the City College of New York to San Francisco State—raised demands to desegregate admissions and neighborhoods while decolonizing curricula. Freedom schools, workshops, direct actions, and other kinds of experimental initiatives redefined learning as a creative, community-rooted process that could prepare people to transform society at large.

Within this context, a *dual-power framework* emerged against the backdrop of anticommunism, Jim Crow racism, domestic counterinsurgency, and imperial war. Activists urged a “long march” to take over social institutions while creating counter-institutions.⁴⁴ This approach boomeranged struggles between campuses and communities while melding anarchism, Black/Native/Third World (inter)nationalism, and communism into new ideologies encompassing a vast range of revolutionary initiatives. Although fierce debates about militant strategy and coalitional responsibility abounded, the scale of this liberatory ecosystem compelled the US government to develop a *counter-intelligence* program to undermine it.⁴⁵

Fifty years later, neoliberal colonial-racial-gendered capitalist policies built in the wake of COINTELPRO have prompted mass incarceration, debt, and social inequality that contemporary US social movements have struggled to counteract.⁴⁶ In response, some radicals inside the university are developing plans to jettison it. Meanwhile, some liberals and foundations are also seeking to escape campus boundaries using a reformist vision of learning access that erases the liberatory intentions of their forebears. This dynamic portends the conditions for an ideological vacuum in which university-based insurgent teaching and scholarship are replaced by an intellectual retouching of existing models and approaches that are then broadcast outward from campuses to communities under the guise of transformative pedagogies.⁴⁷

Many works in the field of “Critical University Studies” emphasize the theoretical contributions of Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Immanuel

43 Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Eileen Eagen, *Class, Culture, and the Classroom: The Student Peace Movement of the 1930s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Carol Smith, *The Struggle for Free Speech at CCNY, 1931–42*, <https://virtualny.ashp.cuny.edu/gutter/panels/panel1.html/>.

44 German student organizer Rudi Dutschke, inspired by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, mobilized the term “long march through the institutions” for revolutionaries to embed their struggles in social institutions as a long-term strategy toward overthrowing capitalism and creating societies anew. See Dutschke, “On Anti-Authoritarianism,” *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 249. See also Rebecca Tarlau, “Prefigurative Politics With, In, and Against the State: The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement and Latin American Philosophies of Education,” in *Schooling in the Caribbean and Latin America: Reproduction, Resistance, Revolution*, *LÁPIZ* 5 (2020), 49–81; Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, *Long March, Short Spring: The Student Uprising at Home and Abroad* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).

45 Ammiel Alcalay, *a little history* (Los Angeles and New York: UpSet Press, 2012).

46 Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, eds., *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Eleni Schirmer, Jason Wozniak, Dana Morrison, Joanna Gonsalves, and Rich Levy, “Making the Invisible Visible: Organizing against the Instructionally Harmful, Antidemocratic Effects of Institutional Debt,” *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom* 12 (2021), https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/Schirmer_et_al_.pdf/.

47 One example of this repackaging is Cathy Davidson, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

Kant, often applying their conclusions to conditions quite different from theirs.⁴⁸ Likewise, we must ask why the abovementioned appeals to exodus, fugitivity, marronage, pessimism, and refusal are being advanced in this specific moment. These positions are understandable given the embrace of emancipatory visions amidst a heightened state of despair that permeates late capitalism. However, cursorily applying the lessons of fugitivity and marronage from struggles that occurred centuries ago in Brazil, Haiti, Jamaica, and the US South to our own twenty-first-century urban situations risks replicating a “floating tactic,” as Salar Mohandesi has observed, “in the hopes of rediscovering the strategy it emerged from.”⁴⁹ Meanwhile, a pessimistic suspicion of coalitions has emerged alongside wariness about transforming the institutions whose current rulers are bereft of radical consciences.⁵⁰ This orientation may suggest that we can’t learn to trust each other across differences when confronting the forces that immiserate us, or that we can’t distinguish between our systemic oppressors and those who would struggle alongside us to obtain freedom. Anti-institutionality commits this strategic error on a larger scale by rejecting the spaces and resources that could be run collectively by people.

New York Liberation School foregrounds the momentous struggles inside one public university—a battle for control over social infrastructure—to show how we can get free more broadly.⁵¹ CUNY geographer Celeste Winston zeroes in on such possibilities: “The language of fugitivity, in relation to infrastructure, illuminates how everyday survival acts often deemed unlawful can combine into a material basis for struggle.”⁵² Similarly, CUNY historian Yarimar Bonilla historicizes the role maroons had *in relation to* institutions. Rather than a refusal of engagement, Bonilla highlights how marronage “represents a form of strategic entanglement: a way of crafting and enacting autonomy

48 Aijaz Ahmad identified a contradictory moment after 1968, when many of these intellectuals processing the defeat of the general strike in France turned to a deconstructionist focus on the “death of the subject” and “the end of the social,” while in the US, 1968 onwards signaled an escalation by multiple social movements of the possibility of revolutionary change. Even so, the enduring Eurocentrism of the US academy has imposed upon much of our present relationship to universities with this historically and geographically misplaced analysis of defeat. See Ahmad’s essay “Literary Theory and ‘Third World Literature,’” in *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 1992), 60–61. A welcome alternative to this trend, drawing analyses from his own experiences teaching at CUNY, is Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

49 Salar Mohandesi, “On the Black Bloc,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, February 12, 2012, <https://viewpointmag.com/2012/02/12/on-the-black-bloc/>. For a powerful rejoinder to this critique, read Anonymous, “‘We All Float Down Here’: RAM’s ‘Floating Tactics’ and the Long Hot Summer of 1967,” in *Movement for No Society* (Seattle: Contagion Press, 2018).

50 Kellen Browning and Brian X. Chen, “In Fight Against Violence, Asian and Black Activists Struggle to Agree,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/us/black-asian-activists-policing-disagreement.html/>.

51 George Jackson similarly dedicated attention to creating “autonomous infrastructure” as part of building revolutionary capacities. See George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1990), 69. See also Robin D. G. Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle,” *Boston Review*, October 24, 2016, <https://bostonreview.net/forum/robin-d-g-kelley-black-study-black-struggle/>; and Lucien Baskin, “‘We Must Learn What We Need to Survive’: Making Abolitionist Presence at the City University of New York,” *Society and Space*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/we-must-learn-what-we-need-to-survive-making-abolitionist-presence-at-the-city-university-of-new-york/>.

52 Celeste Winston, “Maroon Geographies,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111, no. 7 (2021): 8. See also Celeste Winston, “‘How to Lose the Hounds’: Tracing the Relevance of Marronage for Contemporary Anti-Police Struggles,” PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 2019; Deborah Cowen, “Infrastructures of Empire and Resistance,” *Verso* (blog), January 25, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3067-infrastructures-of-empire-and-resistance/>.

within a system from which one is unable to fully disentangle.”⁵³ In the following chapters, we will see how CUNY educators like June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich studied the relation between the plantation and the university.⁵⁴ Following their example, rather than relinquish past insurgent lessons or uncritically transplant them into another time and place, we can update and rearticulate them into our distinct conditions today. In the process, as queer cultural historian José Esteban Muñoz affirms, we can “take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names.”⁵⁵

There is no *away* toward which we might run. Fleeing our cities and institutions to establish small-scale communal projects in isolation will not guarantee social liberation. In fact, we would be surrendering contested territories and resources to the neo-colonial elites who seek to expel us. How, thinking alongside the poet Gil Scott-Heron, can we learn to run together *toward* liberation by refusing to cede ideological and material grounds?⁵⁶ What practices could help us reclaim the dual-power tradition of metamorphic collaboration between the university and the universe(s) beyond? Reflecting on the role of education in African decolonization struggles, CUNY people’s historian Kazembe Balagun recalls that “the school was not just a physical embodiment.” Instead, revolutionaries could “carry the institution in their minds . . . and then rebuild it in any location.”⁵⁷ Keith Basso writes similarly about a “reciprocal relation in which individuals invest themselves in the landscape while incorporating its meanings into their own most fundamental experience.”⁵⁸ *New York Liberation School* highlights what happens when people commit to radically reinventing an urban learning institution and its surrounding spaces instead of abandoning them as a lost cause.

Diving into City College and CUNY’s histories reveals the university to be an invaluable archive of struggle and world-making, but the lessons of City College and CUNY aren’t handily replicable. Instead, this book’s immersive attention to an institution—a “militant research” from inside of it—aims to inspire people rooted in other places to conduct your own in-depth studies about the institutions you inhabit and to better understand our particularities as well as how we interrelate across respective sites of movement work.⁵⁹ As you read these pages, focus on what makes your homes, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, hospitals, transit systems, and food resources run.

53 Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 43.

54 See also Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013); Bianca C. Williams, Dian D. Squire, and Frank A. Tuitt, eds., *Plantation Politics and Campus Rebellions: Power, Diversity, and the Emancipatory Struggle in Higher Education* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021).

55 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 74. See also Tavia Nyong’o, “José Muñoz: Then and There,” *The Baffler*, February 10, 2021, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/jose-munoz-then-and-there-nyong-o/>.

56 Gil Scott-Heron, “Running,” *I’m New Here*, XL Recordings, 2010, CD and LP.

57 Kazembe Balagun, “The Role of Intellectuals: A Brief History of My Intellectual Development,” *Instagram*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/COO5CZ2DAhQ/>.

58 Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 102.

59 Natalie Bookchin, Pamela Brown, Suzahn Ebrahimian, Colectivo Enmedio, Alexandra Juhasz, Leónidas Martín, MTL, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Andrew Ross, A. Joan Saab, and Marina Sitrin, *Militant Research Handbook* (New York: New York University, 2013).

Who operates which levers of daily (re)production? What could be done differently? Consider the physicality of these sites, their relationship to the land and to people across generations. Consider their enmeshment with other scales of conflict. Each institution that we transform is a new footing from which to aid others' transformations.

Strategically, schools are among those *seed institutions* most fruitful to collectively claim. Rhythmically consistent semester by semester, they serve as “convergence spaces” for critical thought and action, allowing us to learn how to push and grow through mass direct democratic participation.⁶⁰ At the same time, this consistency can mislead. In fact, because of CUNY's mutability, it has been difficult to document its institutional histories. The ruse of institutions is that they are static when in fact they are recreated every day—and can be created anew in different directions. Studying CUNY has allowed us to recognize that the institution is never bound or predictable; struggles to reinvent the university quake beneath our perceived sense of its fixedness.⁶¹ This dynamism is the secret source of the university's power, a built-in contradiction allowing us to create a new university in the shell of the old.

This book therefore focuses on how people worked to construct radically new relations within existing structures—within the same classrooms, buildings, and cities that were built without these changes in mind—while we also navigated the destabilizations that arose from our efforts. This meant overcoming selective notions of prefigurative or insurrectionary politics that assumed we could only create new conditions and spaces by physically tearing down existing ones. Even so, Marx cautions, “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”⁶² The City College and CUNY experiments recounted in this book confronted the ideological structures and practices of the existing institution, not by burning it down, but by completely rebuilding it. In the process, the university and city we knew were transformed along with their participants.

Living Archives

The dilemma of narrating social histories using the incomplete record of archives has recently been circumvented by a turn toward speculative ways of reading (and writing) within the archival silences. This method has been practiced most strikingly by interpreters of enslavement and emancipation.⁶³ However, in reconstructing more recent epochs like the one covered in this book, we run the risk of repurposing an imaginative approach suitable to a long-ago era for use in a context for which an ample archive ex-

60 Christina Heatherton, *Arise! Global Radicalism in the Era of the Mexican Revolution* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 16–18.

61 For a discussion about this in the context of Women's Studies, see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 112–113.

62 Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (New York: International Publishers, 1989 [first published 1871]), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm/>.

63 See Lucille Clifton, *Generations: A Memoir* (New York: New York Review Books, 2021); Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14; Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019); Toni Morrison, “Rememory” and “Memory, Creation, and Fiction,” in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Knopf, 2019), 322–325 and 326–333; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). Gratitude to Tanna Tucker for the Morrison citations.

ists but has yet to be plumbed.⁶⁴ Little by way of concrete detail is widely known about the lives of the people highlighted in this book, which perhaps indicates the lack of intergenerational connection among and across our movements. We must stay rooted in their material experiences rather than succumbing to nostalgic or melancholic fictions. The 1930s City College organizing veterans passed on long ago, and their legacies are too little known today. The 1960s and '70s militants are closer—a good many are still alive—and they shaped my own generation's struggles to transform CUNY and New York City more broadly.

Despite the abundance of archival records from these earlier movements, we have retained little of these people's lived complexities. What music did they listen to, what comfort foods were shared with loved ones? In which moments did they feel frustrated with the scale of repression they faced from administrators, city elites, and the police? Were they ever overcome with tears in the middle of a busy intersection or in the hushed haven of their beds? When would their classrooms chorus into laughter? So much about their lives is unarchived. As a result, many in the present have a limited understanding of the intricate classroom, campus, and community relationships that led to these strikes and freedom school initiatives. Today, CUNY and citywide movements are likewise insufficiently archived in ways that could inform future upsurges. In revisiting these historical lessons, we welcome current agitators to document your methods for later generations to wield. An emphasis on crowdsourcing CUNY's radical legacies might offer the chance for past and present participants to emerge from the shadows and coauthor these CUNY histories yourselves.

Universities have both absorbed and erased the records of our education movements. The CUNY administration has repeatedly surveilled, seized, and destroyed records of Black, Puerto Rican, and feminist-led struggles. Meanwhile, many movement participants refuse to entrust their records and testimonies to the institution. Throughout the development of this book, such dilemmas were useful for thinking about how to document movements in motion. For example, the April–May 1969 City College campus takeover and the creation of Harlem University was only documented by a handful of participants. Along with interviewing and reading subsequent accounts by the takeover's Black and Puerto Rican student organizers, I filled in interpretive gaps by reflecting on similar encounters that I have experienced firsthand. I wasn't present at the 1969 takeover, but I have been inside and outside of multiple occupied/decolonized campus buildings and urban spaces. In these pages, I try to reenact the anticipation and weight of each moment in which a zone is held; the kinetic power of bodies amassed; the makeshift ways to turn a school into a living room. I was not present in City College classrooms across the twentieth century, but I infuse them with my experiences as a City College student and as a teacher in dozens of CUNY classrooms over the course of seventeen years.

64 Various scholars have demonstrated how immersive archival research can recompose lessons from past struggles. For example, Brad Duncan, *Finally Got the News: The Printed Legacy of the U.S. Radical Left, 1970–1979* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2017); Johanna Fernández, *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Jorell A. Meléndez-Badillo, *The Lettered Barriada: Workers, Archival Power, and the Politics of Knowledge in Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Education, Organization, Metaphor, Labor

Thinking with Paulo Freire and bell hooks, if we view “education as the practice of freedom,” then we must assess how contrasting ideas of freedom can yield conflicting modes of learning.⁶⁵ To mimic the person who teaches you, to view certain classmates as representatives for the whole group, to recognize everyone in the room as your equal, or to consider no one to be worthy of interaction: these are all political positions from which we learn how to act outside the classroom.⁶⁶ We often inherit organizational forms from “dead generations” rather than devising methods suited to our current moment.⁶⁷ As these City College educators and students showed us through their pedagogy and political activity, the reciprocal relationship between study and movement can help us rethink questions of revolutionary organization in the present. CUNY educator Ira Shor identifies the task in this way: “the first task of the liberating classroom is to solve the teacher-student contradiction—an ongoing technique, a way of life; not an abstraction—as part of a larger contradiction of working within anti-democratic hierarchical institutions toward democratic anti-hierarchical intentions.”⁶⁸

The metaphors our movements have used to describe universities also reveal varying political motives. Many readers will be familiar with the analysis that presents the university as a factory that concentrates people (raw materials), coerces specific repeated behaviors, demands speed-ups and slow-downs, and ultimately churns out finished products.⁶⁹ Late-1960s Bay Area struggles imagined places like San Francisco State College as trains: locomotives of history to be commandeered, featuring conductors (teachers) and energy (students), special compartments based on ticket prices, huge vessels engaged in movement.⁷⁰ The Baltimore Algebra Project refers to present-day classrooms as laboratories, stages, and “crawl spaces” where different experiments and roles can be tried out covertly to then be practiced in more overt arenas of struggle.⁷¹

City College poets like Sol Funaroff and Adrienne Rich, writing respectively in the late 1930s and early 1970s, both used the metaphor of the ocean to characterize the classroom and the broader social milieu: our surface familiarity belying unknown depths, the ebbs and flows of waves and shorelines, maritime conflicts between state, commerce, and piracy.⁷² Our communities are the sea itself, the rushing and roaring,

65 Paulo Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1976); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2021).

66 Eli Meyerhoff also offers a compelling typology of seven modes of education under capitalism: vertical imaginary, romantic narrative, relations of separation between students and producers and the means of studying, techniques of governance, zero-point epistemology, affective pedagogical economy of credit and debt, and binary figures of educational value and waste. See *Beyond Education*, 15.

67 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1937 [first published 1852]), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>.

68 Ira Shor, interview with the author, January 28, 2022.

69 Edu-Factory Collective, *Toward a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, The Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2009).

70 Karen Tei Yamashita, *I-Hotel* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2010).

71 Bob Moses, *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); and Jay Gillen, *Educating for Insurgency: The Roles of Young People in Schools of Poverty* (Chico: AK Press, 2014).

72 This metaphor has been embraced by feminist movements across the Americas and the Caribbean.

the trickling—even the moments of immense stillness. The campus becomes a container for that energy, which then splashes back out to neighborhoods. In turn, each report from a field of struggle is a lighthouse in these churning seas. Inhabiting this metaphor still further, each wave of action contributes to the next by amassing experiential currents or by channeling existing complicities in fresh directions.

Our analyses of organization and study must also address the shifting conditions of labor in the university. The peak moment of upheaval at CUNY occurred at the same time that the university expanded the hiring of low-wage adjunct faculty with little job security. According to Nick Mitchell, “What brought ethnic studies into the university was not only social movements; it was the university itself, [which was] incredibly adept in the absorption, rearticulation, and rerouting of activist desires into forms of institutionalization,” including the adjunctification of teaching labors.⁷³ Adjunct faculty bore the cost of the gains made through the rapid creation and expansion of Ethnic, Gender, and Sexuality Studies departments won through struggle.

These linked phenomena—Black, Third World, and feminist pedagogies and contingent labor—have indelibly shaped CUNY in that these studies and labors are both “adjunct” to the university status quo. At the same time, however, by virtue of their inclusion and containment, they possess the power to transform the university from its margins. The liberatory paradigms developed by CUNY teachers like Toni Cade Bambara, David Henderson, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich (all of whom were first hired as adjuncts) have become deeply woven into our adjunct teaching and learning practices in Ethnic, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and far beyond. They link our livelihoods in the home, community, and classroom; they inspire an inquiry-based humility and warmth in study; they envision writing composition as a way to refashion oneself in relation to others; and they foster struggle across differences for mutual liberation. The long CUNY movement doesn’t *have* a pedagogy; *it is* a pedagogy. Despite the ubiquity of such counter-disciplines, however, they often remain unseen, unvalued, and uncompensated. They are a form of care work that the university relies upon but refuses to honor.⁷⁴ The feminized labor of adjunct teaching and the pedagogical innovations pioneered in Ethnic, Gender, and Sexuality Studies have become sites both of duress and of *potencia* [power].⁷⁵

Chapters in Our Collective Story

Chapter 1, “Freedom Learning Lineages and Obstacles,” reviews the braided origins of Black, Puerto Rican, and Women’s Studies and movements in the long twentieth century. It first considers the history of City College in the 1920s and 1930s, when Jewish students mounted desegregation campaigns on campus and fought fascism in Spain. These actions fostered a rebellious campus milieu that enabled the struggles of the 1960s and ’70s to emerge into a wave of overlapping liberation movements. Analyzing how coalitions

73 Nick Mitchell, “The Fantasy and Fate of Ethnic Studies in an Age of Uprisings: An Interview with Nick Mitchell,” *Undercommoning*, July 13, 2016, <https://undercommoning.org/nick-mitchell-interview/>.

74 Verónica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (New York: Verso, 2020), 27.

75 *Potencia* can be translated from the Spanish as the power *to do* something, rather than the power *over* someone/something [*poder*]. This framing of non-coercive power has been embraced by Latin American and Caribbean struggles since its elaboration in *Colectivo Situaciones’ 19 and 20: Notes for a New Insurrection* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021).

were forged across differences attends to the schisms between Black, Puerto Rican, and Jewish people in CUNY and New York City. This chapter highlights the 1965 creation of the SEEK Program, the 1969 City College “Harlem University” takeover, the 1970 creation of Open Admissions, the 1976 imposition of tuition, and the 1999 defeat of Open Admissions. On the basis of these events, it establishes CUNY’s role in shaping the cultural and political-economic landscape of the United States.

Chapter 2, “Creating the ‘Black University,’ ‘black city,’ and ‘Life Studies’ with Toni Cade Bambara, David Henderson, and June Jordan,” explores political identity, institutionality, geographic space, and study through the prism of Black liberation. These three educators brought their experience from New York City neighborhood learning programs into their teaching at City College and, following the 1969 strike, boomeranged these lessons back out into the city.⁷⁶ Bambara and Jordan created Black feminist visions for Black Studies, and Henderson developed a disability-centering focus on youth learning and urban reinventions from his work with neighborhood deaf students and with City College’s Black and Puerto Rican students.

Chapter 3, “Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich: Sisters in Struggle,” focuses on the entwined interventions that Rich and Lorde made in CUNY and within New York City more broadly.⁷⁷ A careful reading across Lorde and Rich’s archives and writing situates Lorde’s calls to harness fear and eros alongside her poem “Blackstudies” and Rich’s calls for counter-institutional *re-vision* alongside her poem “Diving Into the Wreck.” Lorde and Rich carried these insights into a wide range of settings that re-configured public education and social movements. I also consider the contributions made by Mina P. Shaughnessy to extend the SEEK Program’s lesson to nationwide educators by exploring her speech “Diving In.”

Chapter 4, “The Power of Student Writing and Action,” analyzes City College student compositions in the diverse forms they took during the 1960s and ’70s. It is an invitation to more fully recognize the central role of youth—and the capacious practice of study—in liberation movements. The chapter explores Samuel R. Delany’s early creative writing and memoirs; the “Five Demands” that mobilized the creation of Harlem University; Paul B. Simms, Louis Reyes Rivera, and Sekou Sundiata’s work in *Tech News/The Paper*; Francee Covington’s writing in Bambara’s *The Black Woman* anthology; clandestine compositions by Guillermo Morales and Assata Shakur in the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional and the Black Liberation Army; and anti-fascist interventions by the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee.

76 Some of the archival materials and earlier versions of this text first appeared in *Toni Cade Bambara: “Realizing the Dream of a Black University” & Other Writings (Parts I & II)*, ed. Makeba Lavan and Conor Tomás Reed and *June Jordan: “Life Studies,” 1966–1976*, ed. Conor Tomás Reed and Talia Shalev, in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7* (New York: The Center for the Humanities, Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2017).

77 Some of the archival materials and earlier versions of this text first appeared in *Audre Lorde: “I teach myself in outline,” Notes, Journals, Syllabi, & an Excerpt from Deotha*, ed. Miriam Atkin and Iemanjá Brown, in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 7* and *Adrienne Rich: “What we are a part of”: Teaching at CUNY, 1968–1974*, ed. Iemanjá Brown, Stefania Heim, erica kaufman, Kristin Moriah, Conor Tomás Reed, Talia Shalev, Wendy Tronrud, and Ammiel Alcalay, in *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, Series 4* (New York: The Center for the Humanities, Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2014). See also Conor Tomás Reed, “Diving Into SEEK: Adrienne Rich and Social Movements at the City College of New York, 1968–1974,” in *Jayne Cortez, Adrienne Rich, and the Feminist Superhero: Voice, Vision, Politics, and Performance in US Contemporary Women’s Poetics*, ed. Laura Hinton (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2016).

Chapter 5, “Contemporary Struggles for Our Futures,” brings these histories to bear on the CUNY movement from 9/11 to the present. Our long resistance to US colonialism and imperialism did not disappear after the end of Open Admissions, but instead grew in opposition to the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the concurrent militarization of CUNY. Multiple waves of struggle—Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, solidarity with Palestine and Puerto Rico—boomeranged through CUNY to nourish a militant cohesion that would address the overlapping crises of COVID-19, neoliberal austerity, resurgent police violence, and erosion of abortion access. The present ecosystem of CUNY movements offers a model for coalitional power that can help us to navigate the uncertainties we now face.

The Coda, “CUNY Will Be Free!,” invokes the queer decolonial demand for freedom as a perpetual horizon and vast territory of transformation to create a *People’s University*. Celebrating the vast worlds composed and recomposed within CUNY and our surrounding city, we caution against the absorption of our movements into existing power structures. We also critique the practice of top-down, institutional “respectability archiving” and the parasitic appropriation of our struggles for individual gain. Instead, we propose a radical coalitional archival methodology to suggest how we might document our histories while manifesting our futures.

Readers are hereby invited to join the *New York Liberation School* coalition so that we can remake this world.