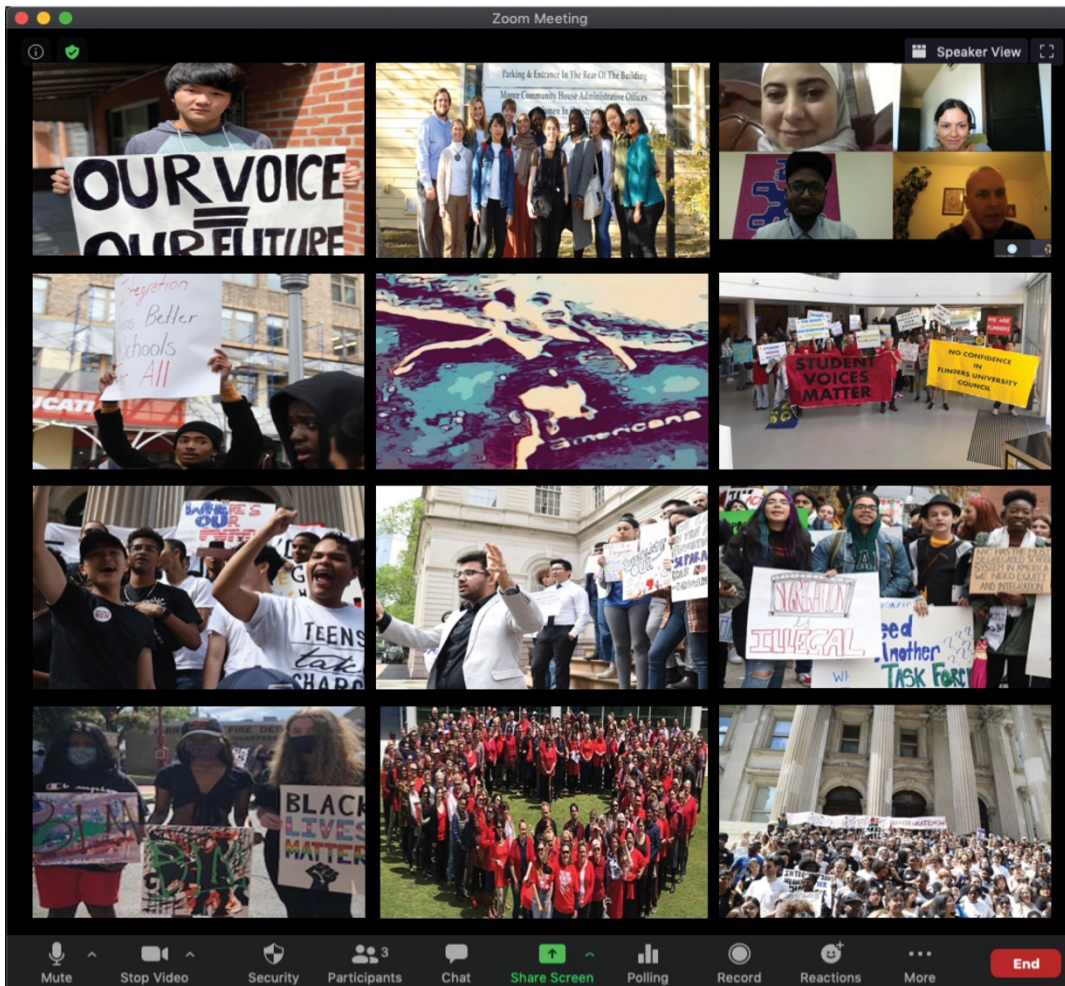


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Introduction Visions of New Student Activism

by Jaqueline Brady



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For Louis Kampf and all students in movements for a more socially just world.

Your heart is a muscle the size of your fist--Keep on loving, keep on fighting.

—Ramshackle Glory

There may be a time when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest

—Elie Wiesel

This special issue of *Radical Teacher* on New Student Activism has been relatively long and rather tumultuous in the making. Let's rewind to when we first started talking about doing a special issue on this topic back in 2018. At the time, several young student protest stars had risen to the status of internationally famous pop icons. Notable among them were Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani feminist and activist for girls' education; Emma Gonzalez, the Parkland massacre survivor turned anti-gun activist; and Greta Thunberg, the Swedish climate activist. Yousafzai's galvanizing story of being shot by the Taliban for encouraging girls to attend school was being read by third graders; posters depicting Gonzalez along with the slogan *We Call BS* decorated not only the offices of progressive professors but also corporate storefronts; and an international surge in youth activism on social media was being attributed to Thunberg and widely recognized as "the Greta Effect." These student-aged protest celebrities operated in the popular imaginary as hopeful signs that the younger generation was working bravely for social change. But, laudable as their accomplishments are, they were not our inspiration for this issue on new student movements.

At *Radical Teacher*, we know that no single individual can embody the collective resistance that is necessary to combat the destructive structures that control our lives. Only social movements composed of lots of people doing lots and lots of everyday organizing can do that. And so, our hopes were set on what looked like an increase--could it be a movement wave?-- in organized student resistance on university and college campuses across the US. Campuses here seemed to be bubbling, if not roiling, with student protests against aspects of neoliberalism, racism, and sexism. Meanwhile streets in Chile and Hongkong were erupting in student-led pro-democracy and anti-government demonstrations. Student protesters were stirring things up from walk outs to die ins; organizing through hashtag posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram; carrying signs and mattresses; using their bodies and words. They were taking aim at the neoliberal policies responsible for student debt, top-down university governance structures, and unethical corporate investments. They were demanding stronger responses to racist incidents and the removal of Confederate symbols and monuments at their schools, along with an end to police brutality in their neighborhoods. And they were

working to raise awareness about sexual harassment and castigating higher education for housing a shameful culture of sexual violence and rape.

By their very nature, such student movements are multifaceted, mobile, and morphable, making them difficult to pin down. Their numerous varying actions, however well organized, are often purposely disruptive and their lasting impacts are hard to measure. As a result, they are much harder to capture in the mainstream media than the charismatic, and usually telegenic, individuals who might come to represent resistance. Plus the powerful forces that student movements fight against usually want them out of sight. Still, the groundswell of student movements growing on campuses was impossible to ignore. *The Atlantic Monthly* had noticed this "renaissance in student activism" (Wong) already back in 2015, attributing it to the influence of the Global Occupy Movement, which inspired a series of internationally coordinated protests. By the fall of 2018, Harvard's *Ed. Magazine* reported on "the most forceful surge of youth activism since the 1960s" (Jason). It was in this context of "the new age of student activism" (the declaration by Harvard's *Ed. Magazine*) that we drafted, then circulated, our call for submissions and soon began receiving several of the articles that appear in this issue.

Then we got pummeled by the Covid-19 crisis. Campuses closed down, forcing students to go home and student activists to regroup. For a while, our streets got quiet except for the piercing *wahhhh!* of ambulances transporting those with the deadly virus. We fretted and grieved; "pivoted" to remote learning and online teaching; and adapted to the "new normal" of social distancing, all the while trying to make larger sense of the "rapidly evolving situation" outside our doors. At times, doubt crept in: how relevant are student movements in the midst of a pandemic with colleges deserted by students, faculty, and administration; and streets empty of people? Could this protracted Covid moment herald the end to education as we know it? And if so, what will happen to the kind of student activism that not only shaped our perspectives as radical teachers but also, we believe, improved our institutions of learning, disciplinary fields, and academic departments?

Just as these questions started forming, eroding our confidence in the urgency of producing this issue on New Student Activism, George Floyd was killed by the police in Minneapolis on May 25. The nearly nine-minute video of his murder went viral, showing Floyd handcuffed and lying with his face on the ground, pleading for his breath, life, and ultimately his mother. Almost instantly (and in spite of Covid quarantine restrictions), people across the US and in over 60 countries around the world took to the streets in spectacular displays of opposition to racial violence and police brutality. The movement for Black Lives was reignited, and students were out front. The hard questions they were asking--"Am I next?" "Who do you call when the police murder?" and "How many weren't filmed?"--made it more clear than ever that student activism, on and off campus, was a matter of life and death.

Less than a week later, while we were still processing what sometimes seemed like a tsunami of sad and surreal events, another painful thing happened: we lost our dear

comrade and founding *Radical Teacher* board member Louis Kampf (to non-Covid-related illness). Louis had been in hospice care for some weeks, but the news of his death still hit hard. He had enthusiastically participated in a face-to-face board meeting just before Covid lockdown and had continued to respond to our group in emails filled with political conviction and linguistic wit, his signature combination. We never imagined we would have to say goodbye to Louis so soon or get used to board meetings without his caring and curmudgeonly presence, and we will miss his steady and supportive “solidarity, with a dash of love” (the closing words of one of his final emails to us).

We published Louis’ obituary in Volume #117, the most recent issue of our magazine. We now dedicate this volume on student activism to him and reprint his radical Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in 1971: “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding): Literature and Language in the Academy.” We wanted to include Louis’ talk, framed here with the words of his fellow founding *Radical Teacher* editorial board members/colleagues/friends Paul Lauter and Dick Ohmann, partly to pay homage to him for his decades of tireless work in so many movements for social justice. But we also thought it particularly fitting to run Louis’ speech in this issue about new student activism because it addresses several of the problems that activists on college and university campuses are still contending with today. Already back in 1971, for instance, Louis lambasted an academy devoted to serving the elite few, anticipating neoliberalism’s current stranglehold on higher education. He rebukes the academic profession for its irresponsible overproduction of PhDs--for plunking them into a disappearing job market to compete for precious few full-time or tenure-track positions while marking impossible piles of student papers. Louis also smashes the still shockingly beloved model of an academy that secludes itself from the workaday world and its political relations. The disciplines of the humanities, in particular those of literature and modern languages, he argues, should not be conceived of as self-enclosed fields for a privileged professoriate who, in the apt if indelicate parlance of Stanley Aronowitz, think that their shit don’t stink. For Louis, who could have been speaking for all of us at *Radical Teacher*, our purpose as educators is not located in “enclaves devoted to separating the business of the intellect from the clamor of the world outside.” Instead, worthwhile teaching must be political. Moreover, to make any meaningful change inside the educational institutions where we work, we have to join movements and work for radical change outside of them.

Suffice it to say that during the span of time in which this issue on new student activism was being produced, many of us had to navigate a destabilizing topography. (And this is not even to mention the constantly quaking landscape of the Trump Administration and similar authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the world). The articles that appear on these pages evolved through the long year’s cascade of crises. The authors worked to take the changing contexts into consideration while they revised. They did this most clearly in two ways: 1) by speculating on the efficacy of virtual technologies for new methods of meeting, organizing,

and consciousness raising; and 2) by touching on Black Lives Matter and the protests raging on the streets since May 25.

Accommodating to shifting circumstances gave us time to compile a more extensive selection of material on New Student Activism. In addition to Louis’ MLA Address, we feature seven articles, which vary in approach and subject matter, from an ethnographic study of radical student activist groups in California, to a pedagogical discussion of service learning in Mississippi, to an essay that argues for the importance of internet memes in political consciousness raising and radical teaching, to a narrative essay providing a cautionary tale regarding the destructive potential of Alt-Right counter demonstrators and offering along with it as some protection, a working annotated bibliography on freedom of speech. We also include reviews of Jerusha O’Connor’s book *The New Student Activists: The Rise of Neoactivism on College Campuses* and Roderick Ferguson’s book *We Demand: The University and Student Protest*. In addition, we have three “Teaching Notes” offering lessons about #MeToo, the student debt crisis, and activist activities for pre-service teachers. And we were able to expand this part of our magazine with a new section of “Activist Notes” featuring inspiring contributions from Liz Sanchez, an activist working to change the California State University System, and Sophie Mode, who shares the voices of students from Teens Take Charge (TTC), a New York City public school activist group started by high school students. Teens Take Charge photographer Dulce Michelle also provides us with an accompanying photo series of their demonstrations so that we can see this young group in action, protesting inequity in NYC public schools.

In the process of selecting the range of works presented here, we prioritized submissions that affirmed the voices of student activists, encouraging some authors to make even more space for them. All in all, we hope that you will find this issue offers a thought-provoking arrangement of pieces about new student movements and current activism, with a rich mix of student activist voices. We encourage you to listen closely for the composite conversation that emerges among the different contributions to this volume, for it is raising urgent issues, highlighting tricky tensions, and asking difficult questions.

When we take together all of the different contributions in this issue, some clear themes appear. Here’s what we see among the new student activist groups represented in this issue:

They use digital and internet technologies to beneficial effect.

Whether meeting on Zoom, agitating through political memes, or wielding the camera on their smartphones to bear witness to injustice, the new student groups featured in these pages are adept at tech. Although student movements have long used available technologies to mobilize their members and circulate their messages, it is clear that today’s internet and digital technologies are more effective for socially distant organizing well beyond the Covid

crisis. With their substantially wider and more instantaneous reach, the technologies being used readily enable student groups on the West coast to partner with groups on the East, and for activists in international student movements across the globe to come together.

They resist hierarchies in their own organizations.

Not unlike 1960s organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society, new activists have internalized the distrust of hierarchical relations, and it shows in the way they organize themselves. Several of the groups discussed here have adopted horizontal participatory methods, intentionally working against the tendency toward hierarchical formation in organizing, which they see as inherently anti-democratic. Their respect for intersectional identities, another through line among these activists, provides a dynamic framework of fluid subject positions that seems more compatible with horizontal approaches and participatory democracy.

They are not afraid of the C words: Care and Caring.

In what appears to be a departure from the anti-bourgeois discourse of self-sacrifice that is familiar to us from the radical student movements of the 1960s New Left, the student groups in this volume attend to their need for self-care. They recognize the detrimental health effects of their activist work as they confront powerful neoliberal administrations and endure intimidating counter attacks from the alt-right. As part of their attention to wellbeing, they prioritize the building of caring relationships within their groups and see their activist work as an act--or actions--of love.

They place importance on the process of cultivating a collective vision.

Several groups here show that co-creating a shared vision is a central step in coming together as activists. From "visioning processes" conducted by international activists who gather on Zoom to collaborative writing done by students inside prisons, these groups understand the value of building a communal vision for social change and the potential of storytelling for activating the radical imagination. Many groups know the legacies of student activism that precede them and draw on them for inspiration. These collaborative vision building processes bear some semblance to earlier feminist consciousness raising practices, particularly in so far as they help to establish a common discourse. Their purpose, however, seems to be more about unifying members who are already activists than creating awareness that might lead to activism.

Some do and some do not focus on movement building or imagine a revolution as their end goal.

Some groups discussed here follow the pattern of 1980s activists who worked, as our general editor Sarah Chin has pointed out, "in smaller orbits, on specific goals." They go about their routine business of organizing without counting on cultural or political revolutions. Still others, harkening back to the 1960s and earlier, do see their activist work as part of a broad movement toward revolutionary change.

They still disagree as to whether they should work inside or outside of the system they are trying to change.

The new activists here are wrangling over an old question of social justice movements: Is it better to work within the system in order to change it, or must effective resistance come from outside? This fraught question is perhaps best known to us from the Black Integrationists versus Black Separatists debates of the 1970s. (Recall, for instance, James Baldwin's famous essay arguing that Black English is a separate language and that Black children should be taught by Black educators.) A version of this dilemma emerges most noticeably here among the student groups that are fighting neoliberalism at colleges and universities. This is partly because these student activists are embedded in and reliant on the same corporate academic system that they oppose. Some even learned their activism through radical professors like us who protest on campus alongside them. So it is not always clear for activists at colleges and universities if they should (in their own argot) "Play well with others!" or "Fight the power!"

Nowhere is this inside/outside conundrum more obvious than in the article "We Don't Need Your Permission: The Era of Non Affiliated Student Activism" by Rebecca Dolhinow. Part of a fifteen-year ethnographic study of student activists mostly in the California State University system, Dolhinow's essay looks at how groups position themselves vis-a-vis the organizational structures of colleges and universities. She argues that the groups that elect to operate outside of the college or university system--particularly those that do not gain status as officially affiliated or campus sponsored student groups--have more freedom. Activism in neoliberal campus settings, Dolhinow shows, gets co-opted by corporate administrations who only permit the kinds of student organizing that helps sell the university. Meanwhile, more radical groups are controlled by the administration, who monitor their actions, limiting and surveilling their meeting spaces on campus. While Dolhinow's article makes clear that student groups are safer and more autonomous when they work outside of the system, she suggests that their decision to do so may come with a price on their health. Liz Sanchez builds on this discussion in their Activist Note "The Great Sham of the California State University System."

In a move that we think would satisfy Gerald Graff, we have included an article that “teaches the conflict” presented by this student movement dilemma. Whereas Dolhinow wants non-affiliated student activists fighting neoliberal policies from outside of the system to be heard by university administrators, Aidan Cornelius-Bell and Piper Bell believe that student activists will be more effective if they work from within the system, “sharing the university” as “partners” and “with a seat at the table.” In “Partnership as Student Power: Democracy and Governance in a Neoliberal University,” they discuss a recent managerialist restructuring at South Australia’s Flinders University, arguing that student activism is indeed necessary to resist the corporatization of the university and to change it from a business model focused on marketplace success into one that functions in a democratic manner for the public good. They contend, however, that working within neoliberal structures, as they have done, holds out hopeful possibilities for such a change and is a more relevant form of student activism today than previous kinds of activism that came from outside the university system as part of broader movements for social justice.

In their two-part work “Free Speech and Academic Freedom in the Era of the Alt-Right,” Robin Hackett and Javier Rivera demonstrate that student activism on campuses today is not only co-opted by neoliberal administrations. It is also threatened by odious alt-right groups, like Turning Point USA (TPUSA), which have misappropriated claims of freedom of speech and stolen some subversive moves from the playbooks of earlier student movements. The first section of this work, “The Weaponization of Free Speech,” tells a harrowing story of how off-campus alt-right activists--in Gorilla costume and using guerilla tactics--crashed a rally sponsored by College Democrats. In the series of events that ensued, a professor’s relatively innocuous, albeit appropriately vexed, Facebook post was taken out of context and circulated on alt-right sites, resulting in vicious harassment--including threatening emails and phone calls--against faculty who supported the campus rally.

The authors warn us that hateful groups such as TPUSA are organized and out there, poised to attack personnel and programs, particularly those connected to Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Race and Ethnic Studies. (In fact, just recently, one such group made a vile attack at my own college, Zoombombing an LGBTQ+ Anti-Bullying Event that was sponsored by our Student Life Organization.) Hackett and Rivera maintain, however, that teaching and learning about hate speech, so that we may distinguish it from free speech, can help us build “cultures of resistance and resilience in the face of these attacks.” To this end, they offer us a chronologically arranged “Annotated Bibliography on Academic Freedom,” covering several major works on this topic from the culture wars of the early 90s to the Trump era. They encourage us to add to and share this working bibliography with other educators and students. This contribution to our issue is especially pertinent in the context of Trump’s 2019 Executive Order on Campus Free Speech, which pretends to promote free inquiry at institutions, but in

implementation will more likely result in propping up alt-right organizations and conservative watchdog groups.

In his article “Collective Visioning: Igniting the Radical Imagination,” activist-scholar Matt York asserts that we have more to learn about activism from social movements on the streets than from courses on the neoliberal campus. Tracing some key antecedents of the recent “transnational wave of revolt,” York maps a genealogy of liberatory knowledge co-production emerging among activists within social movements. One of the most salient lessons that results from this history of social movements and knowledge co-production, according to York, concerns emancipatory methods of “collective visioning.” These methods are non-hierarchical and, in the author’s view, necessary for imagining social change. “We cannot think an end to capitalism,” York argues, without such a process of collective visioning because we cannot build a world that we cannot imagine. (This point might explain why so many progressive educators and *Radical Teacher* board members are currently reading Afrofuturist novels.) His article suggests that we may have thrown the baby of the radical imagination out when we got rid of the utopian bath water. And now, in order for ecological and anti-capitalist activists to move forward, we need a hopeful but practical shared vision, grounded in caring relationships, that is constructed collaboratively through horizontal processes gleaned from social movements.

Rhiannon Cates, Benjamin Hall, James Broughton, Andrew Reeves, Faith Hocutt Ringwelski, Kathryn Zaro, Jenna Richards, and Lani Roberts are the authors of the collaboratively written article “‘Building that World’: Movements of Vision in the Carceral Classroom.” They would strongly agree with York that co-creating collective visions of a better future is essential activist work. The eight writers in this collaboration are two teaching assistants and six university students from a writing course taught inside a correctional facility as part of the Inside-Outside Exchange Program, which brings incarcerated students and conventional college students together in carceral classrooms. Here, where locked doors, prison walls, and barbed wire demarcate both physical and mental boundaries, the very act of coming together to learn, write, and “think an end to prisons” is already one of courageous intentional resistance. Echoing a quandary similar to that faced by the student activists Dolhinow discusses, these authors ask: “How do we go about creating change and repairing harm caused by institutions from within those very institutions?” They find an answer in their “Writing as Activism” course work, where they see their integrated learning experience and collaborative narrative writing as a loving “practice of post-carceral world-building,” part of a student-led prison abolition movement dedicated “to bringing a world beyond prisons into being.”

In their essay, “‘OK Boomer’: Internet Memes as Consciousness Building,” Morgan Anderson and Gabriel Keehn encourage us to pay attention to the influence of internet memes in order to see their potential as tools for raising political awareness. The authors point out that while the usefulness of internet technologies and social media for

organizing activists has been widely recognized, the power of internet memes has generally been overlooked, even though memes have become a prevalent form of political communication for young people today. Unpacking the role of the irreverent “OK Boomer” meme, Anderson and Keehn explain that iterations of it are a way for millennials and young people to convey their frustration with the hypocritical Boomer mindset, which deems millennials spoiled, lazy, and immature, even though Boomers are actually the ones culpable for having handed down seemingly insurmountable structural inequalities. On the surface, OK Boomer memes here compare to British punk rock in Dick Hebdige’s (2011) description of it as an apparently defiant cultural form that offers only oblique resistance. But the authors of this article see memes as a “proto movement” that presents more direct opposition to hegemony than we initially might expect. They posit that internet memes can function, in the general culture, as “consciousness building work that is a necessary precondition for political organizing” and, in our classes, as radical pedagogical tools that provide effective starting points for teaching about structural power.

Finally, for those of us who see our classes as the principle sites of our social activism, Premilla Nadasen’s essay, “Pedagogy and the Politics of Organizing in Mississippi,” demonstrates the value of experiential learning that goes beyond the comfort zones of our liberal campuses. Nadasen reflects on lessons learned from teaching “Mississippi Summer,” a collaboratively designed community-engagement course. For this course, the author and her Barnard College students traveled to Biloxi, and other areas in Mississippi, to work with the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative (MLICCI), a local non profit organization that helps underprivileged working mothers. As opposed to many community-based learning experiences that aim to benefit the students involved, Nadasen’s course was designed in close partnership with MLICCI to respond to its needs as a community-serving public advocacy organization. At the request of MLICCI, one of the main course objectives was to develop an Index of Women’s Economic Security. Nadasen’s class succeeded in this goal, but along the way there were some unexpected learning outcomes that were more inspiring than accomplishing a concrete task. Nadasen and her students discovered that communities of grassroots activists, even in the deep red states that have abandoned them, are busy working together to develop networks for collective well-being. The author underscores the significance of this kind of “under the radar” activism, which is based on building caring communal relationships among ordinary people. In this approach to community uplift, Nadasen sees vestiges of the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), particularly in their rejection of top down organizing in favor of empowering ordinary people. According to Nadasen, this often-ignored form of activism--this constant and loving relationship building work-- “cultivates leadership,” “lays the groundwork for mass protest,” and can result in “meaningful and lasting change.” Emphasizing collective co-learning processes over individual final products, experiential classes

like “Mississippi Summer” are themselves a form of educational activism that counteracts the grade obsessed neoliberal tendency toward personal achievement.

To conclude this introduction to our issue on New Student Activism, we thought it would be good to take a cue from the encouraging activist groups discussed in these pages. Let’s try co-creating a new vision of student activism that does not make the mistake of focusing on any one individual activist star. Please suspend, for the sake of this closing exercise, your distrust in Zoom, or similar digital platforms, as capitalist technologies with problems of social equity and privacy. Instead, picture a secure Zoom meeting filled with hundreds of thousands of social activist participants, including full groups and whole movements, who are fighting for social justice and a better world. See Black Lives Matter, Never Again, and #METOO along with all the other well-known new activist movements. But notice also all the local, lesser known, though equally important, new groups such as Teens Take Charge and Students for Quality Education. Please make sure not to overlook the millions of progressive educators using social justice pedagogy. Go ahead and invite all your activist friends and their activist groups to join this imaginary planning meeting on the topic of collaborative wishes for the future. And while we are here, let’s call on the angel of history and ask her to forward an invitation to our ancestral groups like SNCC and SDS from the 60s, and the anti-apartheid and AIDS movements from the 1980s. Make sure that Louis Kampf gets the invite too. We need them all to attend so that we can absorb the wisdom of their experience. Times are dark, but this window is big and bright. Your mic is on. Are you ready to contribute?

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