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Teaching Solidarity: Popular Education in Grassroots U.S. Social Movements

Tenaya Summers Lafore

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TEACHING SOLIDARITY: POPULAR EDUCATION IN
GRASSROOTS U.S. SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

A Dissertation Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
Department of International and Multicultural Education

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

by
Tenaya Summers Lafore
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CHAPTER IV: CARVING OUT AUTONOMOUS SPACE

This chapter describes the background and context for both programs through the lens of social movement free space. In Chapter I, I introduced the concept of *free spaces*, which are small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization. (Polletta, 1999, p. 1)

This autonomy from dominant power can “allow people to collectively cultivate counter-hegemonic agendas and projects” and these counter-hegemonic agendas then make possible collective action (Heidemann, 2019, p. 314). Heidemann (2019) argues that under “under certain conditions, formalised popular education programs can act as free spaces that actively facilitate the reproduction of social movement activities” (p. 314). In particular, popular education programs can act as free spaces when they are able to “link the *tangible concerns and realities* of community-members to the building of *counter-hegemonic educational projects* that tie up with the emancipatory agendas of broader-level social movements” (p. 315; emphasis added). But when popular education programs are “pre-packaged, standardised and persistently require the approval of external actors with close links to established authorities, then the potential for such a site to act as an effective vehicle for social movements is highly questionable” (p. 315). The concept of free space clarifies that popular education inherently faces a structural tension: between the democratic needs of participants for greater agency in their lives, and the hierarchical and coercive nature of hegemonic power within capitalism.

While the Grassroots Empowerment and Leadership program and the Workers’ Dialogue were distinct from each other in many ways, both were formed in the context of extensive efforts by their creators to carve out learning and organizing spaces that were free from many of the hierarchical and coercive pressures faced by traditional education programs so that they could link the concerns of participants to counter-hegemonic projects—they were trying to create free spaces. These efforts, and the contexts they came out of, are the subject of this chapter. In the case of the GEL program, facilitators intended to develop a program that was relatively

protected from some of the pressures of government-funded non-profits and their tendency to maintain the political status quo through what INCITE (2013) calls the “non-profit industrial complex” and Kamat (2004) calls the “NGOization of democracy.” In the case of the Workers’ Dialogue, veteran labor organizers sought to create a program that could resist the top-down bureaucratic structure and culture of the modern labor movement and its tendency to mimic the coercive practices within the workplace (Parker & Gruelle, 1999). This story of how and why they attempted to carve out these autonomous spaces is as important as what happened inside the programs themselves, and provides the context for what the programs were able to accomplish.

The Grassroots Empowerment and Leadership Program: Seeking Autonomy from the NPIC

The Grassroots Empowerment and Leadership was developed in the context of a long history of grassroots neighborhood resistance in the Tenderloin and South of Market neighborhoods of San Francisco. As will be shown below, it was also developed in response to the anti-democratic influence of a large city-funded non-profit, in line with many grassroots organizations and academics who have sounded the alarm about the encroaching influence of government- and foundation-funded non-profit organizations (INCITE!, 2013; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013). By creating a program *outside* the direct control of large government-funded non-profits, veteran organizers hoped to carve out a space that was protected from some of the institutional constraints facing traditional non-profits and thus able to support SRO residents’ autonomous leadership. This section describes the background for this effort, including the historical context of grassroots resistance in the Tenderloin and SoMa, as well as the NGO restrictions on tenant organizing, leading organizers to look for independent avenues to build grassroots agency.

History and Background

As described in the methodology, the GEL program was rooted in two particular San Francisco neighborhoods, the Tenderloin District and South of Market District (known as

SoMa). From the outside, the Tenderloin and low-income parts of SoMa are only described for what they lack: safety, security, cleanliness, wealth. Participants in the program placed the blame for these real problems squarely on the city; they frequently described the Tenderloin as a “containment zone” for homelessness and drug dealing, meaning that the city has condoned the pushing of criminality and misery into an already struggling neighborhood. Alim noted in our first interview that “the Tenderloin is sandwiched between City Hall on one side, and the city’s main commercial district [Union Square] filled with Balenciaga and Gucci stores and tourists on the other side” (interview, 7/13/20). At the time of the GEL program, tents lined many streets, and had multiplied by almost 300% since the pandemic began (Stone, 2020), while large public spaces like the nearby Civic Center were kept empty. Sidewalks and gutters were often filled with trash. Drug dealing happened in broad daylight on multiple street corners, despite a police station located in the middle of the neighborhood on Eddy and Jones Streets.

South of Market, or “SoMa,” once home to longshoremen, immigrant farm workers and other manual laborers in the early 20th century (San Francisco Examiner, 2010), now includes a mix of single room residential hotels, high rises, and redevelopment including the new Twitter headquarters. While SoMa is a vast neighborhood, reaching up to Van Ness Avenue and stretching all the way from Market Street to the new Mission Bay development, and has gentrified significantly over the decades, the organizing work of PNDP and SCA focused on the remaining low-income blocks around 6th Street across Market Street from the Tenderloin. These blocks, like the Tenderloin, are known mainly for the problems they face.

While the problems in Tenderloin and low-income parts of SoMa are significant, residents did not see them as defining the neighborhoods. James, one of the creators of the GEL Program, told me that as a result of the community work in the neighborhood over recent years there was “more of a pride in it and identification with the neighborhood.” He said,

Now there is just more solidarity. People have begun to identify with each other... Whereas before, it was very alienating, if you lived here you hated it... People began to realize that there was a generosity, a tolerance for difference, a certain generosity that

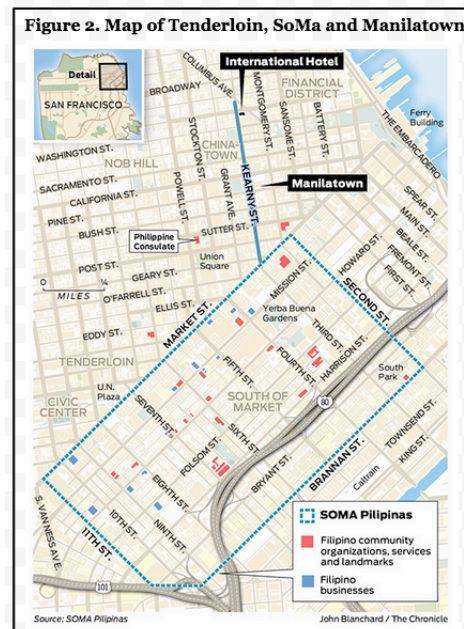
residents shared that people began to recognize. [Before] there was a lot of fear... it was a much more of a dog-eat dog world kind of attitude. And that began to shift, as people began to start realizing that they had some things in common. (Interview, 4/19/21)

Participants in the study took pride in this shift in the neighborhood; for example June said in one class that in the Tenderloin, “You can walk out your door and are meeting people, seeing people you know and they’re friendly.” She said that in the “Avenues” (the Sunset and Richmond Districts of San Francisco), “people say hello but you don’t know your neighbor, don’t take the time to stop and talk” (Electoral history class, 7/11/20).

From this view, the true story of this area is also the history of vibrant social movement struggles for San Francisco’s low-income communities, for affordable housing, and for self-determination. The primary housing stock in the Tenderloin and adjacent part of SoMa is what are known as “residential hotels,” or single-room occupancy units (SROs), which are typically 8 x 10 foot rooms with shared bathrooms and no kitchen. At the turn of the 20th century SROs were the majority type of housing in San Francisco, but with the wave of urban renewal beginning in the 1940s nationwide, this accessible housing was significantly reduced, especially between the 1970s and 1990s.²⁵ At the same time, there was an increase in poverty while funding for public housing decreased, forcing low-income tenants who had lived in apartments into fewer SROs. The result was more people needing low-income housing but far less of it available, creating a housing crisis that forced whole communities out of San Francisco and led to greater homelessness within the city. (Central City SRO Collaborative, n.d.).

²⁵ Originally home to gold rush prospectors, sailors, migrant laborers, and low-wage city workers, SROs also became the “the first footholds” for Latinos in the Mission, Chinese in Chinatown, Japanese in Japantown, Filipinos in Manilatown, and African Americans in the Fillmore and Western Addition (Central City SRO Collaborative, n.d., (para. 4). Nationwide, one million units of SRO housing were demolished nationwide between the 1970s and 1990s. According to the Central City SRO Collaborative, “One of the principal causes of the widespread homelessness endemic in the United States today was the wave of S.R.O. hotel demolition that swept the country during the second half of the 20th Century.” In San Francisco over 15,000 SROs were demolished or converted to condominiums as part of the city’s plan for urban “renewal” between 1970 and 1990. The head of San Francisco’s redevelopment agency, after whom the famous Justin Herman Plaza at the Embarcadero is named, at the time said, “This land is too valuable to permit poor people to park on it” (Central City SRO Collaborative, n.d., para. 10).

In response to the city’s efforts to demolish low-income housing, activists began organizing in the 1960s against this urban renewal in the Tenderloin and SoMa, as well as in a once a vibrant Filipino neighborhood called “Manilatown” in what is now the financial district.²⁶ While the fight for Manilatown and the famous International Hotel—home to 200 Filipino seniors—was initially lost, it ignited a movement for tenants’ rights. SoMa residents effectively organized against urban “renewal,” successfully fighting to have “replacement low-income senior housing built to offset the destruction of existing housing” and community efforts protected. In 2000, the South of Market Action Network (SOMCAN) was formed, and successfully prevented eviction of elderly low-income residents and families at Trinity Plaza on Market Street, preserving hundreds of units (SOMA Filipina, n.d.). Other community institutions such as the Tenderloin Times, a multilingual community newspaper, and the North of Market Planning Coalition, a grassroots organization of activists who organized for city planning decisions in support of low-income residents, contributed to a civic organizing culture being developed in the neighborhoods (see Figure 2 for a map that shows the Tenderloin, SoMa, Manilatown and the International Hotel).



At the time of this study, a number of different neighborhood institutions, many of which will be described in this chapter, continued to cultivate this civic participation. The culture that

²⁶ Manilatown was a 10-block radius of low-cost housing and family-owned businesses, home to 10,000 Filipinos and “decimated” by the city’s redevelopment efforts in the 1950s and 1960s (SOMA Filipina, n.d.). In the late 1960s, the neighborhood became the epicenter of a movement of tenants, artists and activists to defend low-income communities in the city against redevelopment when an SRO building called the International Hotel (also known as the “I-Hotel”), home to 200 Filipino seniors, was slated for demolition. Beginning with an eviction order in the 1960s, a ten-year community struggle to save the hotel culminated in a standoff in 1977 when hundreds of riot police attempted to forcibly remove the tenants while thousands of community members and activists surrounded the building. Using “brutal force,” the police succeeded in removing the tenants (SOMA Filipina, n.d.). Through long-term community organizing, the hotel was eventually rebuilt, and houses low-income seniors today.

June and James described above rested on the organizing work done in the community over the previous fifty years; as Waters and Hudson (1998) described over twenty years ago, “Since the late 1970s.... the community has led a neighborhood renaissance through multi-lingual newspapers, enthusiastic residents, and organized activists and professionals who were determined to create a lively neighborhood where low-income people can afford to live” (para. 1).

Non-Profit Limitations

As part of this “neighborhood renaissance,” local activists created the Central City Development Corporation (CCDC) in the 1980s to fight the loss of affordable housing.²⁷ The organization’s initial goals were 1) “property acquisition, to ensure long-term affordability by removing units from the speculative real estate market,” 2) tenant organizing, “with the aim of creating cooperatively owned and self-managed communities,” and 3) activism through the mobilization of local residents “to protect these residents’ interests in the face of proposed neighborhood development” (CCDC: Our History, n.d.).

At the time of the GEL program, CCDC owned dozens of buildings that housed very low-income residents, primarily in the Tenderloin but other neighborhoods as well. Their programs included an Organizing Division that ran community organizing classes and also sponsored community organizing efforts by residents. Armand, the primary architect of the GEL program, had created and helped to coordinate many of these programs, including community organizing classes; separate community associations for the Black, Chinese and Filipino residents; a healthy corner store campaign; a community garden; and an informal planning class to educate residents about the city planning process.

²⁷ According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (n.d.), the wage needed for a two-bedroom apartment in 2017 was \$21.21 per hour, “exceeding the \$16.38 hourly wage earned by the average renter by almost \$5.00 an hour, and greatly exceeding wages earned by low income renter households....If you are poor, you are essentially an illness, an accident, or a paycheck away from living on the streets.”

Armand had spearheaded many of these efforts and was proud of the progress that had been made through CCDC. At the same time, he and James found that there were limitations to the organizing work they were doing there “because there were certain issues organizations [like CCDC] wanted to avoid” (interview with James, 4/19/21). Alim also felt that,

CCDC is doing the best it can within its framework. However it’s still a limited framework, just like with any other non-profit. The neutrality of it. Even though they are pushing for certain policies, certain ballot measures, there are certain things that they can’t really discuss about, can’t really advocate for. (Interview, 7/13/20).

One of these areas they wouldn’t advocate for was the housing conditions inside their own buildings. Because CCDC was a low-income housing developer, it was also a landlord for the same residents that are being organized within the Organizing Division. While on paper there was a structure of participatory governance where residents had a voice in the management of their buildings, in day-to-day practice the organization used a bureaucratic grievance system that left residents to advocate for themselves individually. Armand, Reynardo and Mahjawe shared in interviews that there were many concerns that had been left unaddressed.

With no functional mechanism for CCDC residents to effectively address their concerns, Armand, Reynardo, Mahjawe and others began organizing a tenants’ association. They successfully built tenant organizations in three geographic areas: the Eastern Tenderloin, Western Tenderloin, and SoMa. They did this openly; a planning document written in 2013 stated that the association was not intended to “diminish or supplant the authority, power and work the authority” of CCDC but to “strengthen the structures of CCDC by including the voice of the residents in the planning and decision making process” by forming this autonomous organization of residents (internal document). Eight to ten buildings, including close to 1000 residents, were organized with leadership in each building, and the association met regularly with the CEO to discuss their concerns. Armand recalled,

I was able to set up a regular check in with the CEO and the COO... so that they meet each other on a regular basis and they talk about tenant problems! [Laughs] They are bringing it directly to him! Like, oh my god, there should be some bureaucracy here [sarcasm]—talking about tenants, you have to talk to the building manager, not to the CEO. But they’re bringing it directly to him. (Interview, 9/2/20)

Through the association, residents began to organize around getting security cameras on buildings and addressing complaints from residents about their building managers.

Around the same time, Armand had also tried to organize a union with CCDC staff after hearing complaints from building desk clerks and janitors. He had been transparent with management about the unionizing effort as well because participation was theoretically part of the governance model used by CCDC, and CCDC had recently asked mid-level managers what projects they wanted to work on independently. About both the tenant organizing effort and the union campaign, he recalls thinking at the time that,

If we can actually create change in CCDC, we can create change anywhere. How can we make CCDC a people's non-profit? And actually work in governance participation, [where] governance is tolerated; and there's a system within so the participation will be institutionalized. Not just every year you come up with survey questions and people fill it out, no. No, it's not just a once a year thing to hear their voice, it should be everyday. And it should be in the system. (Interview, 9/2/20)

Armand's intention was to create an "everyday" democracy within CCDC, which he thought would be possible because part of the mission of the organization was to create self-managed resident communities.

But both efforts were shut down by CCDC management. The director of Human Resources called him about the union effort and told him to stop his efforts, which he did; and CCDC pulled the funding from the tenant organization. When Armand told me about this, I commented that he was able to keep his job, and he said, "Because I didn't push too much" (interview, 9/2/20). Meanwhile, Mahjawi's supervisor told him to stop organizing in CCDC buildings. While Armand didn't fight on the union effort, Armand, Reynardo, and others did continue to meet with management weekly for two months to try to convince them to keep the tenants' association. But Armand recalled that CCDC management told him, "You know, even if you are correct, we are the ones making the decisions here. We are the boss and you are the organizer. You have to follow us" (interview, 9/2/20).

CCDC used not just the stick but the carrot in its approach: Mahjawe was offered a position on CCDC's twenty-member board just after the tenant organizing had been shut down. He decided that "I had to choose one or the other," meaning his board position or organizing tenants. He chose the board position, and while he continued to help out with supporting tenants as a volunteer community member, he admitted that, "If there was anything that was contradictory, I just asked, 'Is it ok for me to do this?'" (Interview, 3/21/21). He felt he was able to continue to "advocate and tell people who to talk to" because of the connections he had in CCDC, but he stopped the tenant organizing work.

Before the program was shut down, Reynardo said that, "We were rocking and rolling, and we were doing things. We were starting to motor up. But CCDC and their way of doing business [went] behind our back to close us down" (personal communication, 6/22/21). He said about this experience of successfully engaging in resident organizing and then having the funding cut that, "It's still a hard thing to swallow, thinking about what we were trying to accomplish, and being taken out by a group [CCDC management] that was supposed to be caring for us" (interview, 11/28/20). Armand reflected back on the experience that "CCDC crushed it because they were probably afraid it would actually challenge them" (interview, 9/2/20).

These experiences led Armand and others to have a changed view of CCDC: "It started as activist organization in the 1980s; the first executive director was a firebrand, so then now it just turned into some sort of non-profit model" (interview with Armand, 9/2/20). This reflected Armand's current thinking of non-profits:

My thinking is that non-profits right now are gearing towards just preservation of the status quo. That's my feeling. They don't want to create like real, real, you know *real* systemic change. Even starting from within, meaning if they can't do it from within their organization, how will they do it outside of the organization? When the mayor says "No, you cannot do that," they will just say, "OK, mayor," something like that. There's no strong – "Hey, we are for these people." (Interview, 9/2/20)