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Listening to Jerome Smith

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” philosopher Walter Benjamin analyzes memories that “flash up” in a moment of danger (1968, 255). Our current “moment” of danger has lasted for decades, confronting us with a seemingly endless stream of recurrent crises and chaotic conditions. The society we live in seems to be unraveling at the seams. Paroxysms of hate, hurt, and fear permeate politics and popular culture. The technological advances, economic arrangements, and political adjustments only recently hailed as harbingers of peace and prosperity have instead produced a toxic blend: unending warfare, ecological crisis, economic injustice, and political repression. For millions of people around the globe, life has become haunted by cycles of dispossession, displacement, deportation, and death. *Insubordinate Spaces* emerges from and speaks to this “moment” of danger.

The aims of this book coalesce around one particular memory from the past that flashes up in this moment of danger. More than fifty years ago, in a time of crisis and confusion much like our own, James Baldwin spoke sadly about living in a nation that could neither hide nor excuse its injustices. In the course of being interviewed on public television by social psychologist Kenneth Clark, Baldwin exuded weariness as he described what he discerned to be the absolute refusal by white Americans to recognize the basic humanity of Black people, the seeming impossibility of being able “to communicate to the vast, heedless, unthinking, cruel white majority” that

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he and other Black people were human and deserved dignity and justice. Baldwin noted that his concern was not just for himself but for the nation as a whole: “I’m terrified at the moral apathy—the death of the heart which is happening in my country.” Noting that he was judging white Americans not on what they *said* but on what they *did*, Baldwin concluded, “they have become, in themselves, moral monsters. It’s a terrible indictment,” he acknowledged, but went on to insist, “I mean every word I say.” Shaken and stunned by the gravity of the situation, Baldwin said sadly, “There are days, this is one of them, when you wonder what your role is in this country, and what your future is in it” (American Experience 1963).

Many people today feel as James Baldwin did in 1963—and justifiably so. Ample evidence of the “death of the heart” and “moral apathy” pervades contemporary political and popular culture. Mustering optimism and hope seems almost impossible in lives filled with frustration and fear, in a world replete with corruption and cruelty. In this moment of danger, Baldwin’s words flash up to remind us that present-day problems have a long history as products of processes that have been going on for decades and even centuries. Each evasion of moral and political responsibility in a particular moment of danger makes the next one even worse. Because the people of Baldwin’s day did not solve their problems, ours are worse; if we fail to address the injustices of our time, the challenges facing future generations will increase.

In 1963, James Baldwin was criticizing the callous indifference to the dignity and humanity of Black people that he viewed as the core of national culture and politics. A half century later, a new round of cruel policies and practices persecutes the poor, foments hatred toward immigrants and members of racial, religious, and sexual minority groups, compromises reproductive rights and due process, and plunders the public sphere for private gain. The ranks of the “moral monsters” that Baldwin described grow larger every day.

Baldwin’s comments to Kenneth Clark focused on the nation’s general acceptance of the disposability of Black life as a national principle. But they also emerged in response to a particular incident that took place just hours before the televised interview. Earlier that day, Baldwin and Clark had participated in a contentious meeting between Attorney General Robert Kennedy and civil rights activists and advocates held at a New York apartment owned by the Kennedy family. Baldwin had invited a distinguished group of Black and white artists and activists to speak to Kennedy, the nation’s highest law enforcement officer, in order to impress upon him the dire need for the government to respond to the reign of terror then being visited daily on civil rights workers. Participants in the discussion included Baldwin; his

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brother David; performers Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, and Rip Torn; playwright Lorraine Hansberry; civil rights leaders Edwin Berry, Clarence Benjamin Jones, and June Shagaloff; as well as a young civil rights worker from New Orleans who had been beaten and jailed in Mississippi, Jerome Smith. The meeting went badly—largely because Kennedy failed to listen to Jerome Smith.

Expecting gratitude from the group for his taking the time from his busy schedule to meet with them, Robert Kennedy started by boasting proudly about his record on voting rights: the Department of Justice that he supervised had “three Negro lawyers” and “twenty-nine Negro clerks” and had filed twenty-nine lawsuits on behalf of Black voting rights, winning about half of them (Eucher 2011, 120). Awkwardly, the artists and activists struggled to explain to the attorney general how inadequate they considered these measures to be—when every day Black people were being brutalized, fired from their jobs, and evicted from their homes for attempting to register to vote. They spoke for and from an emerging understanding within the Black freedom movement that merely securing the legal right to vote in the abstract would not necessarily mean that votes could actually be cast or counted, that there would be anyone on the ballot worth voting for, or that municipal and state voting district lines would be drawn in such a way that all citizens would secure genuine representation. Moreover, while Black voting rights comprised the part of the civil rights agenda most valuable to Robert Kennedy and to a Democratic Party that was gradually losing Southern white voters, access to the ballot was not necessarily the prime goal for the masses of Black people facing racist exclusion and oppression in employment, education, and housing. The artists and activists challenged the attorney general to explain why the administration did not intervene in other ways: for example, why it did not bring pressure on corporations in industries like steel that were headquartered in the North to reject segregation in their Southern establishments (Horne and Schickel 1965, 280).

The activists knew that the attorney general’s brother, the president, had appointed openly racist judges to federal courts in the southern districts. They wanted to know how Robert Kennedy would defend the actions of officials from the Department of Justice and the FBI who, rather than protecting their rights, frequently attempted to convince demonstrators to disperse. Listening to these concerns, however, angered the attorney general. Being bolder on civil rights, he explained, would alienate Southern segregationists “and we have to be somewhat considerate about how to keep them onboard if the Democratic party is going to prevail in the next elections”

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(Belafonte 2011, 267). Kennedy conveyed to the group his belief that while his office had done everything possible to advance civil rights, Black people remained exasperatingly impatient, as evidenced by the very conversation at that meeting. Kennedy advised the group to control those who lacked patience, warning that too many Black people were becoming attracted to extremist Black nationalist groups—an attraction, he warned, that would cause real trouble. Frustrated by the attorney general’s calculated political response to demands that had life and death ramifications for Southern Black people like himself, Jerome Smith spoke sharply to Kennedy, exclaiming, “You don’t have no idea what real trouble is. . . . Because I’m close to the moment where I’m ready to take up a gun” (Branch 1989, 810).

Jerome Smith spoke out frankly and passionately from personal experience. He had been part of a group of nonviolent demonstrators attacked by a white mob that used brass knuckles, sticks, and fists to pummel their defenseless victims. He had escaped death numerous times by being smuggled out of towns wrapped in a blanket and hidden in a car. Southern sheriffs and police officers had arrested him time and time again on trumped-up charges and racist judges sentenced him to serve time in local jails and at Mississippi’s notorious Parchman Prison farm. At the meeting, Smith told Kennedy that the attorney general’s complacency and political calculation made him want to vomit. The young activist began to weep as he recounted times when he was being beaten by Southern vigilantes and law enforcement officers, while Department of Justice representatives at the scene did not intervene. They would just “stand around and do nothing more than take notes while we’re being beaten” (Jones 2009, 193). Smith stated that these experiences were making him rethink his lifelong commitment to nonviolence. “What you’re asking us young black people to do,” he told the attorney general, “is pick up guns against people in Asia while you have continued to deny us our rights here” (Belafonte 2011, 267). When Baldwin interjected and asked Smith if he would ever serve in the military to defend the United States, Smith shouted, “Never! Never! Never!” (K. Rogers 1993, 143). This response stunned and angered the attorney general.¹

Shocked by what he perceived as Smith’s ingratitude and lack of patriotism, the attorney general turned to the older members of the delegation for help in quieting Smith. He related to the group his own story of family upward mobility: how his ancestors had been immigrants from Ireland who had experienced discrimination, yet now his brother was the president of the United States. Baldwin responded that *his* family had a longer history in the nation than Kennedy’s but had not experienced similar upward mobility.

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Upset that the attorney general seemed to expect her to contravene Smith's statement, Lorraine Hansberry said, "You've got a great many very, very accomplished people in this room, Mr. Attorney General. But the only man who should be listened to is that man over there," pointing at the young activist (Schlesinger 2002, 332). Kennedy's response to Jerome Smith caused the entire delegation to realize that the attorney general did not understand the basic realities of the national racial order. Lena Horne later recalled how Jerome Smith's passion required her to respond, to renounce some of her privilege and, to take the side of the masses of Black people struggling for dignity and freedom. She recalled, "You could not encompass his anger, his fury, in a set of statistics, nor could Mr. Belafonte and Dr. Clark and Miss Horne, the fortunate Negroes, who had never been in a Southern jail, keep up the pretense of being the mature, responsible spokesmen for the race anymore. All of the sudden the fancy phrases like 'depressed area' and 'power structure' and all the rest were nothing. It seemed to me that this boy just put it like it was" (Horne and Schickel 1965, 280).

As Clark interviewed him later that day, Baldwin was still visibly shaken from the effects of the meeting with Kennedy. He recounted, "We were talking to a Negro student this afternoon who has been through it all, who's half dead and only about 25. Jerome Smith. That's an awful lot to ask a person to bear" (American Experience 1963). Kennedy's inability to listen to Jerome Smith confirmed Baldwin's worst fears about the moral apathy and death of the heart that he sensed in the nation. The attorney general had been insulted by the way the meeting went and seemed contemptuous of the participants. Robert Kennedy later misrepresented grievously what took place at the meeting, charging that Hansberry and the other artists had vowed they were going to get guns and give them "to people on the street, and they were going to start to kill white people" (Guthman and Shulman 1991, 225). Kennedy called Baldwin "a nut" and ridiculed his homosexuality. The attorney general claimed that NAACP official Clarence Jones only went along with the other Black people at the meeting because he was married to a white woman and probably felt guilty about it (E. Thomas 2002, 224). Ignoring his own hysterical reaction to the meeting, Kennedy later described it as "all emotion and hysteria." He dismissed Smith, Baldwin, Hansberry, and Horne with the claim, "you can't talk to them" (Schlesinger 2002, 334). But while he could not "talk to them," Kennedy could monitor, surveil, and harass them. Four days after the meeting, a memo circulated in FBI headquarters requesting surveillance of Baldwin. At the same time, agents in the New York office of the bureau were told to search their files for

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information on the activist author, “particularly of a derogatory nature.” J. Edgar Hoover eventually added Baldwin’s name to the FBI Security Index, a list of people who would be arrested first in the event of a state emergency (Campbell 1999, 11). The FBI eventually assembled nearly two thousand pages of gossip and innuendo in the file the organization maintained on Baldwin. The author was obviously correct in wondering about his role in the nation and his future in it.

More than five decades later, Baldwin’s words flash up in this moment of danger because the nation is still not listening to its Jerome Smiths. In the midst of the systemic breakdown of the major structural institutions of the society—the economy, the environment, the educational system—experts and power brokers offer top-down technical and managerial solutions to what at root are political problems. Masses in motion in the streets testify to the inability and unwillingness of the political system to “listen” to demands for dignity and justice. The Jerome Smiths of the present poured into the streets of Ferguson and Baltimore to protest unprosecuted police killings of unarmed Black people. They assembled in public places in response to the Occupy movement’s challenge to economic inequality. They stood with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe against the North Dakota Access Pipeline. They flocked to the largest mass demonstration in U.S. history—the Women’s March protesting the Donald Trump administration. These mass demonstrations are the most visible manifestations of something larger, of innumerable grassroots campaigns and mobilizations, of struggles by houseless people resisting the criminalization of their survival strategies; by defenders of the rights of immigrants and religious minorities; by workers in fast-food establishments fighting for a living wage; by advocates for environmental and reproductive justice; and by students, parents, and teachers fighting against high-stakes testing, school closings, and other aspects of the corporate takeover of public education. These mobilizations express the anger and imagination of direct eyewitnesses to war, migration, low-wage labor, hunger, housing insecurity, mass incarceration, reproductive injustice, and environmental degradation. These people and many more today are wondering—as James Baldwin did a half century ago—what their role is in this nation and what their future is in it.

The Nature of Insubordinate Spaces

In this book, we propose the idea that new practices, new politics, and new polities are emerging inside what we call insubordinate spaces. This

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argument stems from two seemingly contradictory yet mutually constitutive aspects of the current conjuncture. The subordination of democratic opportunities and aspirations has become a primary goal of major social institutions. This subordination is enacted through the privatization of public resources, the militarization of international relations, the commodification of all aspects of human interaction, and the mass criminalization and incarceration of abandoned and despised populations. At the same time, powerful currents of resistance to unlivable destinies are shaping struggles by aggrieved groups determined to forge their own futures. People struggling for self-determination and social justice are envisioning and enacting new identities, identifications, affiliations, and alliances in many different kinds of insubordinate spaces, from sacrifice zones and seemingly abandoned and forgotten places ranging from rural regions organized around the economics of resource extraction and agricultural production to urban underscapes plagued by poverty and predatory policing, unemployment, environmental racism, housing insecurity, and political underrepresentation.

Insubordination in this context is a tool rather than a goal. Defiance, disobedience, and intractability can have transformative and redemptive power when mobilized as weapons against exploitation and hierarchy, when they fuel resistance to unjust and illegitimate authority. Yet insubordination in itself is politically and morally neutral. Like transgression, it can exacerbate problems as well as solve them. An abstract allegiance to insubordination can cause great harm. Unconnected to collective goals of social justice, mutuality, and solidarity, insubordination can degenerate into truculence, selfishness, and exhibitionism, fomenting and reinforcing antisocial attitudes and actions.² The insubordinate spaces that we analyze in this book emerge initially from acts of resistance and refusal, from the pledge to be “idle no more” by Indigenous activists in Canada, from the cry of “Ya basta!” (Enough!) by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) across the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, and from the insistence that “Black Lives Matter” voiced by mobilized and militant Black youths in the streets of North American cities. Yet while insubordinate to the imperatives of empire and dispossession, to gender violence and generational abandonment, to misogyny and trans- and homophobia, to austerity and the criminalization of poverty, these movements all go beyond simple insubordination to envision and enact new ways of knowing and new ways of being. They seek to turn poison into medicine, to transform humiliation into honor, to counter the dominant ethos of hate, hurt, and fear with restorative collectivity and resilient love. They temper denunciation of the existing order with annun-

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ciation of a new world on its way. These movements bring together differently situated people to engage in common projects that imbue the world with the potential of making right things come to pass.

In this book, insubordination is an activity located within concrete spaces and places. The social order is also a spatial order, and the economic, political, and social projects of the neoliberal conjuncture are place-making projects. The spatial and social ecologies of neoliberalism demonstrate that ideas attain their full force and import when they pervade the practices of everyday life where places are structured in dominance. In order for social change to *take place*, it takes *places*. Research in philosophy and human geography teaches that a sense of place serves as a key mechanism for developing understanding, self-reflection, thought, interpretation, and action (Adams, Hoeslscher, and Till 2001; Casey 1993, 1997; Casey and Watkins 2014). Struggles to create insubordinate spaces are not primarily battles over territory or turf; they are, at heart, efforts to develop new ways of knowing and new ways of being. Countering the disasters of neoliberalism, as Henry A. Giroux argues, entails “the challenge of developing a politics and pedagogy that can serve and actualize a democratic notion of the social” (2011). The creation and cultivation of insubordinate spaces can play an important role in that development. Place making is a means of generating new knowledge paradigms that rely on the mutually constitutive links between ideas and actions. As biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela contend, “every act of knowing brings forth a world” (1992, 26). Yet new worlds also bring forth previously unexplored ways of knowing. “All doing is knowing and all knowing is doing,” Maturana and Varela explain (1992, 26).

It is inside “insubordinate” community spaces all across the United States and around the world that new politics and new polities are emerging through reciprocal practices of speaking and listening, asking and answering, teaching and learning. Pauline Lipman emphasizes the key role played by seemingly marginalized spaces in constructing new social imaginaries, pointing specifically to community gardens, urban farming initiatives, arts spaces, and economic cooperatives. These are places where people discover and develop “seeds of a democratic, cooperative way of living together” (2011, 147). They emerge from and speak to the needs of social movements, doing important ideological and activist work inside struggles for rights, recognition, and resources. In their extraordinarily insightful work creating psychological practice crafted to serve the purposes of liberation, Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman provide a comprehensive survey of the many different functions of strategic spaces (2008). They point to the utility and

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generative capacity of spaces “where people can experiment with stepping outside inherited scripts and unconsciously assumed identifications to consider alternative performances” (2008, 25), spaces where people encounter difference without dominance (2008, 83), where economic, social, and personal realities can be restructured (2008, 234), and where new forms of cultural practice create “local islands of self-reliance and resourcefulness unnoticed by experts and elites who expect to be in charge of any project of improvement” (2008, 222). These spatial projects are also knowledge projects. As Robin Kelley reminds us, “social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression” (2002, 9).

Yet places do not exist in isolation. Seemingly unconnected locales are united by the politics of place. For example, increased consumption of fast foods and instant meals in affluent metropolises entails concomitant growth in the use of disposable plates, cups, and wrappers, accelerating the destruction of old-growth forests in resource peripheries. This resource extraction on the periphery damages the economies and cultures of Indigenous peoples, while producing a massive increase in wastepaper in the metropole, where the high costs of land in affluent neighborhoods pushes garbage incinerators and waste dumps into urban “sacrifice zones” inhabited by impoverished communities of color (Hayter 2003, 710; LaDuke 2015, 115–134; Sze 2007, 117–118). The reordering of rural and urban places by free trade agreements that eliminated price supports in Mexico and devastated small agricultural enterprises in that nation’s central and southern regions forced displaced peasants and workers to migrate to urban and border regions in Mexico, and later to the United States. They scrambled in their new locales to secure low-wage work as gardeners, cooks, cleaners, and child care workers. Their undervalued labor then subsidized the high-consumption lifestyles of the wealthy urban professionals who profited as both investors and consumers from the surplus value created by the original free trade agreements (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, 7). Cambodians displaced from their homelands by the U.S. military’s saturation bombing and by the violence and brutal repression of the Khmer Rouge government become refugees in the United States. They never really found refuge, however, because they were shunted to dwellings in ghettos and barrios where they shared with their Black and Puerto Rican neighbors the unresolved and enduring consequences of slavery and colonialism through what Eric Tang aptly describes as “racialized geographic enclosure, displacement from formal labor markets, unrelenting poverty, and the criminalization of daily life” (2015, 5).

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Relations between people of different races are relations between people relegated to specific places. Yet every place is a relational entity; all places are connected to and shaped by other places that they in turn influence. Nancy McLean demonstrates how scholarly theories developed initially at the University of Virginia and the University of Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s—with the intent of thwarting school desegregation, and attendant ascendant patterns of economic and social democratization—were used by the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile in the 1970s and 1980s to make changes in that nation’s institutions to provide protection in perpetuity for Chile’s propertied classes. Those actions in South America in turn provided the Koch Brothers, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the American Enterprise Institute, the Federalist Society, and the Supreme Court under the direction of Chief Justice John Roberts with a model for replacing the U.S. constitutional system of checks and balances with a system of locks and bolts, making racial capitalism impervious to democratic dissent and popular redress of grievances (McLean 2017, 154–168).

A similar pattern of transnational interaction between the Northern and Southern hemisphere led Father Gregory Boyle to a very different set of practices. Contact with South American peasants provided him with lessons very different from those gleaned by the Koch Brothers and their employees, allies, and functionaries. Boyle grew up in Los Angeles during the 1950s, but it was not until he turned thirty and spent a year with the Christian base communities in Cochabamba, Bolivia—where, he asserts, “the poor in Bolivia evangelized me,”—that he felt a calling to minister to the poor in his native city. He became associate pastor and then pastor of the poorest parish in Los Angeles, the Delores Mission Church, where he worked with young people in gangs, showing them love, and founding Home Boy Industries, which ran a bakery and other businesses providing employment as an alternative to the violence of the streets (Boyle 2010).

Geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains how uneven social and economic conditions across places can produce seemingly unlikely associations, affiliations, and alliances, especially in the light of profit-driven transformations in spaces vital to the maintenance and expansion of racialized capitalism. Gilmore relates how financiers, farm owners, politicians, and developers came to view a wave of prison construction in California’s Central Valley as a social and spatial “fix” to the broad array of problems posed by drought, declining land values, job-killing automation, capital flight, and urban insurrections. Yet this put urban dwelling ex-inmates and relatives of prisoners in dialogue with rural immigrant (and often Indigenous)

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farmworkers and environmental justice advocates who convened the Joining Forces conference in 2001 to oppose construction of a new prison in Delano, California. Gilmore explains how this alliance between people of different races was also a collaboration of people from different but similar and related places. “Their consciousness,” Gilmore argues, “is a product of vulnerability in space coupled with unavoidable and constant movement through space (an inversion, if you will, of gated communities and full-service suburban malls, but based in related conditions and logics)” (2008, 43).

Gilmore locates the social ecology of insubordinate activism and affiliation inside what she calls “forgotten” places, spaces where organized abandonment by the state and capital creates disorder and cumulative vulnerabilities. Yet these spaces are not simply sites of deprivation. They are the first places to bear the full brunt of the brutality and belligerence of subordinating institutions. Their marginalization creates new opportunities for unbridled exploitation and profiteering that then serve as models to be spread to the rest of society. For that very reason, however, the resistance and resilience that emerges from these spaces can guide and instruct others. Gilmore insists that “forgotten” places are not outside history but rather reliable registers of the problems of the present and their trajectory in the future (2008, 31). As Jean and John Comaroff argue convincingly, sacrifice zones in Africa, Asia, and Latin America contain “traces of things about to happen” elsewhere. In the United States, the Comaroffs note, the organized abandonment of the Black poor living in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005 revealed to the world what local residents already knew all too well: “the extreme poverty, abjection, and inequality in their midst, the hidden effects on national infrastructure of the retraction of the resources of state, the absence of a commonweal, the deep fissures of race and class among them, the ruthlessness of police in dealing with the indigent, the callousness of power in the face of human catastrophe” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 17).

Although sacrifice zones may be tactically forgotten by those in power, the people living in them cannot afford to be forgetful. They know that their imperiled present has its roots in the past, in the enduring legacies of Indigenous dispossession, slavery unwilling to die, and imperial warfare. Their histories and memories contain many examples of insubordinate practices emerging within subordinating institutions. The slave cabin in the antebellum South served as a site of seemingly total subordination of people, living without rights or even recognition of their humanity. Slave owners positioned slave quarters within the sight of the main house for easy surveillance. Night-time curfews confined slaves to their cabins on the plantations while chains,

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overseers wielding whips, and patrollers with bloodhound dogs prevented escape during the day. Yet enslaved African people in America imbued the cabin with a dual identity. They displayed abolitionist prints on inside walls and hid them in underground vaults when slave owners or overseers stopped by. They sheltered runaways from other plantations inside their cabins and furnished them with provisions for their flights to freedom. They slipped away to nighttime revels and frolics where they gathered in clearings in an African manner, and reclaimed the work body for worship and play on their own terms (S. Camp 2014, 10, 44). A similar inversion took place when federal authorities in the United States established boarding schools for Indigenous youths in order to pull them away from tribal lands, end their use of tribal languages, rupture tribal allegiances, and destroy tribal cultures. Yet these classrooms became insubordinate spaces when instead of embracing white Anglo-Saxon identity and culture, the students used their contact with members of other Indigenous nations and the pervasiveness of English as the lingua franca to forge a militant nationalist pan-Indian identity (Nagel 1997, 115–117). Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) and Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) define Indigeneity itself as a place-based form of insubordination, as “an oppositional place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples,” as what “fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world” (quoted in Byrd 2011, xxix).

The mass mobilizations mounted by the Idle No More and the Black Lives Matter movements and the cultural politics of Chicax activists provide the central insubordinate spaces examined and analyzed in this book. Each of them is extraordinary, but none of them is exceptional. They resonate with the same determination to create new spaces for democratic self-activity that has characterized other acts of insubordinate place-making around the world from the liberation theology of the *Ti Legliz*, *Tet Ansanm*, and *Lavalas* movements in Haiti to the Indigenous women’s human rights activism of the *Defensoras Comunitarios* in Peru, to the environmental justice struggles of the South Bronx Clean Air Coalition in New York (Aristide and Richardson 1995, 192; Fregoso and Bejarano 2010b, 29; Sze 2007, 66). Insubordinate spaces are sites where people who lack material resources display great resourcefulness in deepening their capacity to free themselves and others from subordination, to imagine how things could be otherwise, and to move toward enacting that vision.

Insubordinate spaces are not liberated zones or free spaces. They are not utopian places that offer a blueprint for a perfect world. They remain

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immersed in the contradictions of the current conjuncture not transcendently independent of them. Yet they are places of possibility, products of acts of accompaniment and improvisation that reject the division of society into a small elite considered to be, and treated as, exceptional—while the great masses of people are treated as what Pascha Bueno-Hansen describes as “usable, abusable, dispensable and disposable” (2010, 293). They turn many of the tools forged to subordinate them into technologies for liberation. For example, the communications and information technologies that make possible the new global economy of flexible accumulation and “just-in-time” production also enable geographically dispersed Indigenous activists in Canada to “meet” online, to connect with environmental and Indigenous rights activists around the globe, and to circulate images and ideas outside the proximate reach of corporate media outlets. Twitter feeds and online streaming permit street demonstrators in Ferguson to move swiftly and strategically through the metropolitan area one step ahead of the police, to receive knowledgeable advice on self-defense against tear gas and pepper spray from experienced activists in Palestine, and to challenge police pronouncements and propaganda. Digital technologies enable Chicana activists to convene online fifteen women from five different countries to write and record songs about motherhood in the age of neoliberal austerity. These acts turn hegemony on its head by using the circuits and networks of domination for oppositional ends.

In fooling the enemy, however, aggrieved groups can sometimes fool themselves. The social media technologies that facilitate grassroots communication are also instruments of surveillance. Prominence online can lead activists to confuse visibility with viability and to mistake fame for freedom. Virtual contacts can give an illusion of intimacy that serves as a poor substitute for actual accompaniment. Creative conjurers can turn poison into medicine, but counterinsurgency can always turn medicine back into poison. Yet, precisely because no single technology or technique will ever suffice, projects in insubordinate spaces become indispensable sites for improvisations that deepen the democratic deliberation and decision-making necessary for the creative thinking and action needed to imagine—and to live—otherwise. Acts of improvisation and accompaniment inside insubordinate spaces are at one and the same time political projects, cultural projects, and knowledge projects. In this context, politics is more than a set of proclamations, policies, and attempts to take power: it is a diffuse, plural, and diverse set of practices that, as Robin Kelley reminds us, comprises “many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some power over,

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or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives” (1994, 9–10).

Subordinated people can and do create insubordinate spaces where they can cultivate a collective capacity to discern the “what can be” inside the “what is,” where they can hone and refine tools for turning the toxic present into a tonic future, and where they can refuse closure and open up possibility. Insubordinate spaces are places where acts of improvisation and accompaniment fuel the creation of new social relations and new social realities. At a time when corporations, governments, and philanthropic institutions have largely abandoned the masses, the peoples of the world have to find each other. They have to find value in undervalued things, places, and people. They must do so in many different ways in many different kinds of places: for instance, in women’s centers and workers’ centers, in college classrooms and community-based arts and education projects, in food co-ops, and in fights for fair housing.

This book argues that paying attention to what transpires in insubordinate spaces will make audible what Robert Kennedy could not hear in 1963: what Fred Moten calls “the piercing insistence of the excluded” (2003, 223). It explores the challenges facing people committed to social justice in an era when key social institutions have increasingly been reconfigured to conform to the imperatives of a market society. It explores and analyzes exemplary projects in progress in communities and on campuses responding to current crises. It draws on key concepts from social justice struggles in the global south—such as accompaniment, *konesans*, and *balans*—to advance ideas about reciprocal recognition and cocreation as key components everywhere in the construction of new egalitarian and democratic social relations through art, activism, and academic research and teaching. Inside the very institutions set up to support subordination, people can create insubordinate spaces that draw on nonmarket aspirations, ideas, archives, imaginaries, epistemologies, and ontologies. New forms of interactive and collaborative sociality emerge every day. Opposition to the rule of capital and cultivation of capacities for democratic collective life permeate street demonstrations and social media discussions, story circles and spoken word performances, performance spaces, and popular education programs. Mobilizations across race, place, and class challenge the acceptance of war and torture as ordinary acts and policies. They act on behalf of the unhoused population’s right to the city. They identify putatively nonnormative gender and sexual identities as potentially productive of more egalitarian, democratic, decent, and humane social relations. In these insubordinate spaces, people can nurture

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a collective capacity for democratic deliberation, collective decision-making, public engagement, and accountability that challenges the hegemony of neoliberal institutions and practices.

Plan of Subsequent Chapters

Insubordinate Spaces argues that education, the arts, and activism are not simply incidental endeavors suffering collateral damage from neoliberalism's insistence on the fiscalization of social relations; rather, they are key terrains of political and ideological conflict, sites where neoliberal social relations and priorities are learned and legitimized through a pronounced public pedagogy and a conscious cultural training program. We analyze the tools and actions central to that struggle in the following chapters.

A focus on conceptual tools that help bring to light the significance of insubordinate spaces in these intemperate times begins in Chapter 2 ("Concepts for Insubordinate Spaces in Intemperate Times") with discussions of the metaphor and practice of accompaniment articulated by Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador, of the paired ideals of "*konsesans* and *balans*" that fueled Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide's *lavalas* movement in Haiti, and of the political temporality of Immanuel Wallerstein's concept of the middle run. We then turn to consider three extraordinary insubordinate spaces: (1) the knowledge projects and insubordinate practices of the Idle No More movement launched by Indigenous people in Canada in Chapter 3 ("Idle No More"); (2) the deliberate acts of convening outside commercial culture instigated by *son jarocho* music performance and Fandango celebrations in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, the performance art of Chingo Bling, and the installation art of Ramiro Gomez in Chapter 4 ("Artivistas"); and (3) the mass protests in Ferguson, Missouri—insubordinate spaces responding to police killings of Black youths in Chapter 5 ("Ferguson"). The challenges to improvisation and accompaniment posed by hegemonic knowledge projects are explained and analyzed in Chapter 6 ("Coloniality and Neoliberalism as Knowledge Projects"). We explore the complications of developing cultures of accompaniment for insubordinate spaces within the subordinating institutions of college and university research and teaching in Chapter 7 ("Accompaniment and the Neoliberal University"). Chapter 8 (Conclusion: "Carry the Struggle, Live the Victory") concludes the book with a discussion of the ways in which activists, artists, and academics have learned to use improvisation and accompaniment to not only carry on the struggle but also to live the victory by creating more decent and democratic social relations, practices, and institutions.