

artists...what if I intentionally/absentmindedly program only women artists of color?" By which I really mean, I am going to intentionally slant my way of approaching things. Not to pat myself on the back, like "Hey look at this progressive work I am doing, see, really, I am not racist," but more quietly let the artwork be its own statement. This may only be possible in some instances if we are willing to change institutional habits.

As radical, as mother, as salad, as shelter: What should art institutions do
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ETHNICITY AS COUNTERCULTURE
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This essay is a recovery project for an idea that is old-fashioned and yet imbued with a perpetual sense of newness (perhaps like its opposite, that dematerialized space of aloneness, the Internet): the idea of counterculture. My friend Andrew Hsiao first mentioned the term to me many years ago. He began talking about his love of Hanif Kureishi, whose novels and films chronicled the multicultural bohemia of London in the '80s and early '90s. Andrew began telling me about a 1987 film that Kureishi wrote called *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. As the title suggests, the film explores the sexual blockages and liberations of a mixed-race poly couple, Sammy and Rosie, in the age of Thatcher. What struck Andrew was the supporting characters who drift through the film's outsider milieu, like Rani and Vivia, a Pakistani/Afro-Caribbean lesbian couple whose relationship seemed to hint at a whole other world thriving in the offscreen space. When he saw the film, Andrew experienced a glimmer of identification. The point wasn't that he wanted to be these characters specifically, but that their way of living suggested the possibility of a bohemia: a counterculture of ethnicity.

I am a poet and the head of a small community arts space called the Asian American Writers' Workshop (AAWW). The two roles initially appear to be opposites. As a poet, I can invent whole worlds and aggrandize my own often melodramatic emotions. What could be more different than the role of nonprofit administrator, a vocation not typically known for its expressive and auteurist powers? The word "counterculture" has helped me reimagine my role and see the act of running the Workshop as its own creative project: the project of inventing a milieu by juxtaposing artists and communities within a physical space. AAWW is not exactly a counterculture—it is an institution, a workplace, and a 501(c)(3) corporate entity—but the phrase has given me a prism through which I have been able to think about community, possibility, and ethnicity. I think there is something about being marked as an ethnic person in this country that pushes one to find community at the margins. For me, a counterculture is a way of being together where that mark can be temporarily suspended and transmuted into a site of possibility.

As I wrote these words, I felt something frustrating in their expression—a kind of halting movement in the language I kept reaching for, as though the sentence had loaded but its meaning had not yet buffered. It is a struggle I have felt throughout writing this essay. What is writing? Writing is a way of carving something from its context and carrying it into a realm of abstraction. And we are in a moment where all discourses have become politicized, but all context has been banished. Because people in this country interpret politics through silos of identity, these identities find themselves constantly described, attacked, ignored, overdetermined, identified with, ideologized, defended, and commodified. Rather than relations to power rooted in a highly specific time and place, our personal experiences of race and gender constantly evaporate into homogenous abstractions. What I've found difficult about writing this essay is that the sort of ethnic counterculture I am trying to describe runs the opposite direction: it is a social and embodied process, rather than a discursive position. I originally began this essay by describing a community event we held after the election, but telling the stories I heard and describing the people I met felt like divulging matters too private. I cut the section. I began again. I feel like I am scooping water using a sieve, since counterculture is not a theory (which is conceptual and asocial) or a history of political spaces (which is retrospective). Counterculture is a praxis.

Perhaps we can incarnate this essay for a moment using two of the best things in the world: love and film. In *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Rani and Vivia's bohemianism is coded through their race and gender, but they are not exactly aspirational representations meant to dispel ethnic stereotypes. They are characters who are inventing their own social roles, ones more radically disruptive of conventional norms than those of the film's protagonists. Their romantic relationship is private, but readily visible for anyone to see. Their kiss at the beginning of the movie elicits disgust from the film's immigrant father character, played by Shashi Kapoor. (This immigrant father character himself is written with considerable complexity. Unlike the typical POC parent/elder character—so often depicted as avuncular, stern, conservative, and devoid of sexuality and personality—Kapoor's character is also in a cross-racial relationship and, one gradually learns, is a one-time anticolonial revolutionary who eventually joined a repressive state regime, most likely Pakistan.) Like visitors from another less legible society, Rani and Vivia are people who do not want to join the center, but are forging their own future culture. On the one hand, these outsiders mark the exotic allure of the counterculture as an exceptional space that has not yet been processed into the ghost world of suburban homogenization. A racial counterculture, in particular, will necessarily become a target onto which the white center will project its racial fantasies. A counterculture is an impossible location, the place whose site lays always in the asymptote, the negative space blocking us from the horizon. Particularly in eras when a left future seems impossible, such as the neoliberal era from which we will ideally soon emerge, any site that has not been commodified seems simply impossible to imagine. Just as the presence of water persists not just in the oceans, but also in the vapor hanging in the air we breathe and the wet offal of our body, so does capitalism soak everything in its logic. Liberal cultural politics view ethnicity as something to mitigate through inclusion and commodification: the stuff of diversity policies, corporate affinity groups, marketing demographics, the census, food courts, and heritage months. The long Reagan era has fostered similarly conservative strains of multiculturalism, and many people of color desire incorporation in the elite order: in Asian American contexts, I think of the colorism of Hindutva and Chinese Americans litigating against affirmative action. If such ethnic organizations seek power and assimilation, a counterculture would cease to exist by being included, since it is predicated on social relations that would be impossible in mainstream society. A counterculture is not an interest group. Lest I characterize the counterculture as something so precious that it will evaporate upon a single glimpse, my point is not that the counterculture is impossibly authentic, but that it is not an object, not a commodity, and not an attempt to acquire power—it is an organic social practice. Hovering between private and public, a counterculture's occlusion and intimacy means that it cannot serve as a site of representation.

The opposite of the counterculture is the public, which we tend to imagine as a universalized bourgeois sphere floating somewhere out there between Twitter, the front page of the *New York Times*, and the sound of your boss's voice. We all share the public, but it is not a community and is typically informed by norms assumed by the ruling class. Lacan calls this dominant culture the "big Other," the symbolic order that's comprised of stuff like common sense, God, and the nation-state, but I have always thought about it using a different term: "they." You have probably at some point in your life used the word to refer to some unidentified decision-maker. Maybe you found yourself driving lost in a labyrinthine mini-mall and muttered, "I wonder why *they* designed this parking lot without any obvious exits?" Sometimes, this takes on a more overtly political connotation: after the rise of white nationalism,

I found myself often wondering what "they" would do next. The word "they" does a lot of work in these sentences. It names an authority who is unknown but who has somehow affected you beyond the reach of your social relations.

This consensus public sphere can be interrupted by smaller spaces of exception, little patches of resistance in the turf of society. Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner have called these "subaltern counterpublics." A subaltern counterpublic exists as an alternate community of people who have sublimated their social stigma into a discourse. A counterpublic fosters liberation but only inside a narrow limit. "Within a gay or queer counterpublic, for example, no one is in the closet: the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended," Warner writes. "But this circulatory space, freed from heteronormative speech protocols, is itself marked by that very suspension: speech that addresses any participant as queer will circulate up to a point, at which it is certain to meet intense resistance. It might therefore circulate in special, protected venues, in limited publications." What I like about the idea of the counterpublic is that it names the impact of something that may not look overtly political: a community. All publics are ways for strangers to imagine an identity in common, so the creation of a counterpublic can change the ways in which people relate to each other in deeply political ways. Even containers as massive as "the nation" or "whiteness" or "masculinity" or "citizenship" are simply the inherited common sense we share with strangers; definitions always ready to be assaulted by insurgent counterpublics. Because such subaltern collectives are inherently minor, such community building may look trivial in comparison to obviously "political" actions like unionism or party building (which, it might be said, are simply other forms of creating community). But what does it mean for something to be "political"? As the *fin de siècle* socialist anarchist Gustav Landauer wrote, it can be easy to throw a chair at a window, but this assumes the state is simply a thing that can be smashed. "The state is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behavior," Landauer wrote. "We destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another." One way of behaving differently is by creating another public. A public, Warner says, is "poetic world making." Rather than thinking of ethnic or gendered spaces as insular, we can see them as small pocket universes that incubate away from our universe but may expand at any moment and balloon into their own cosmos. These days, instead of any coherent vision of American nationhood that leftists, liberals, and conservatives would all identify, we possess a war of dueling counterpublics from the left and the right. One task of the left is to create new radical spaces that can reinvent the territory of this country's national imaginary. For me, a counterculture is not simply resistance, which is reactive, but a new site to be created. Being with other people in a counterculture kindles a sense of belonging and social possibility: a small touch, a balm of connection to cure the overriding alienation that arises from living, in Hannah Arendt's description, in "a world ... where all human activities have been transformed into laboring." Countercultures can prefigure a coming community. They can be rehearsals for a future society.

Many people of color have probably had the experience of being one of the only nonwhite persons in a room. If there were two or three of you, then maybe you saw each other and perhaps introduced yourselves in that transition after the official business has closed. From such seeds of interaction grow forests of friendships and acquaintanceships that constantly shift and fluctuate. What I call counterculture takes place in the liminal semipublic film that runs between these friendships and the public setting of institutions. In the counterculture, you can gather in ways that

have public effects but that are too illegible for the mainstream power structure to read. Consider this beautiful description of the living room of C.L.R. James, written his collaborator George Rawick and quoted by David Roediger:

Through his house passed hundreds of West Indian, American African and English intellectuals, students, workers, and political people. He somehow had time for a seemingly endless stream of people [including] not only leading intellectual figures and ordinary people whose questions he answered with concern and from whom he consciously learned. I shall never forget his lifelong habit of interrogating people as to the histories of their lives in the most minute details. It was from this practice, as well as constant reading, that James derived much of his understanding of modern society.

James's home on Staverton Road in northwest London functioned as a waystation for fellow travelers in the black radical tradition. The guests who passed through his living room included Aimé Césaire, Orlando Patterson, Stuart Hall, Joan French, Walter Rodney, V.S. Naipaul, and Selma James. This living room was not a formal institution or an organization, but neither did it act as a purely private, domestic home. If you are reading this essay, you have probably entered an informal space like this yourself. The first time I came upon one was in the early 2000s when I found myself in the house of the poet Steve Cannon, who opened his East 3rd Street home into a salon for bohemian writers of color affiliated with the multicultural journal *A Gathering of Tribes*. I only went once or twice but found myself struck by a whiff of surprise: I hadn't quite known that one could be with people in this way. If you've ever read movement histories, you may have found yourself reading a history of living rooms. Consider what is often identified as the first multiracial anthology by women of color, the virtually unknown *Third World Women* (1972). The book includes work by Jessica Hagedorn, Pamela Donnegan, Nina Serrano, and editor Janice Mirikitani, who hosted meetings of the Third World Communications Collective in her home. One lesson of second-wave feminism was that the boundary between public and private could be wobblier than one might think. Even a living room can be a public space.

Things that seem resolutely public can possess origins more intimate than you might initially expect. Until I had heard Andrew talk about Rani and Vivia, my conceptions of counterculture came from the baby boomer iconography of free love, Woodstock, and the drug culture associated with Timothy Leary. The word was actually coined by Theodore Roszak, who argued that these Beats, hippies, and protesters saw their politics as an existential rebellion against an American culture that had homogenized into a soulless technocracy. One escape from dehumanization lay in the civil rights movement. As Douglas Rossinow writes in *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America*, white activists believed their politics allowed them to tap into the supposed authenticity of African-American culture:

The young whites of the new left grew up influenced by the subversive, transgressive romanticization of black Americans in mid-twentieth-century popular culture. The appeal of jazz and rhythm-and-blues, jitterbugging, baseball and boxing, encouraged among some young whites the old idea that African American culture was a repository of authenticity, which spiritually desiccated whites might tap through a kind of racial 'crossover'. [A]ccording to

new left thought, political marginality or alienation connoted radical agency. Yet marginal groups also, paradoxically, seemed culturally authentic to new left radicals. This was the reverse image of their own inner alienation, the alienation of affluence, which equaled inauthenticity.

If middle-class white Americans are seen as possessing a deracinated life, rather than their own highly specific white ethnic identity, this individuality is counterpoised to the imposed authenticity of the ethnic enclave, where life is really being lived. The ethnic enclave is typically seen as an inherently uncreative abject space not on the cultural map (the "ghetto," the Reservation, Chinatowns, the mother country), rather than an already activated space. Raymond Williams once pointed out the dual usages of the word "culture": culture as a way of life, the culture of the anthropologist and the petri dish; and culture as a mode of refinement, status, and civilization, the cultural capital one accrues from reading theory and small press books, publishing in journals, exhibiting in museums and international art fairs, and graduating from major MFA programs. Living in a segregated society, these two realms of culture find themselves separated by a great divide, almost like the great occult rivers that churn through the underworld. Because cultural works created by artists of color come from across this river into a predominantly white and wealthy cultural space, they can often be instantly marked by their difference. These cultural products become *evidence* from a realm of pure reality. A friend of mine once told me about the time they encountered a proud father, who proudly introduced his daughter—a young woman in a hijab—as a surrealist poet. The introduction initially seemed confusing and paradoxical, until my friend realized they had unconsciously assumed that anyone wearing a hijab could never be a surrealist. Most liberals find the Muslim travel ban abhorrent and simultaneously fail to attribute to Muslims any quality of creativity. As Edward Said once wrote, the division between the Western mind and the ethnic body is inscribed into the very heart of modernity. The former is contemporary, innovative, individualistic, technologized; the latter premodern, outdated, embodied, uncreative, abject, authentic. The latter space is always behind: the so-called Muslim world must finally catch up to the Enlightenment, the black family (according to the hectoring of Bill Cosby and Barack Obama) must pull itself up from its bootstraps. The ethnic artist can sometimes become a specimen, a native informer who must translate and explain the life of their own kingdom, rather than a strange, conflicted self who can relish their own full weirdness. There can be a political value in imagining the paradigmatic self of the person of color to be the artist. If the conservative views the person of color as a threat, the liberal views them as a victim and perpetually scours for the perfect victim. The youthful innocence of Trayvon Martin trumps the maturity of Michael Brown, whom the *New York Times* informed us was "no angel." Children imprisoned at the border away from their parents make more sympathetic victims than the children and parents already imprisoned there for many years. When Trump pushed the Muslim ban into law, many Muslim and Arab writers I knew said they could get anything published as long as it was about getting stopped at airport security, rather than the story they actually wanted to tell, one legible in neither the conservative nor the liberal framework. Imagining the person of color as a counterculturalist, as a weirdo or bohemian, means imagining them as someone who cannot be processed easily into the threat/victim dichotomy, but must be imagined as someone who can wreak joy and pleasure and strangeness upon the world.

In the cultural realm, this dichotomy plays out as a supposed opposition between white aesthetics and the meritless representation of communities of color.

This divide recurs over and over again throughout culture wars-era America, as Jeff Chang documents in *Who We Be: A Cultural History of Race in Post-Civil Rights America*. To give just one example, Chang chronicles the landmark 1990 *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* show (CARA). Curated by the Wight Art Gallery at UCLA and a national advisory committee, CARA was the first Chicano art exhibition that toured at major museums—a traveling show that saw itself as an extension of the Chicano movement. This word—“Chicano”—actually hindered the first three grant applications for the show, after funders at the National Endowment for the Humanities found the word’s political connotations too uncomfortable. CARA ended up being a maximalist exhibition that included paintings, installations, slides of over forty murals, a historical framework contextualizing the work within the Chicano movement, thematic explorations of feminism and regional schools, and exhibits dedicated to the art collectives Asco, Los Four and the Royal Chicano Air Force. Chang characterizes the show as a breakthrough in cultural democracy. One audience comment card read, “I loved this exhibit. It’s like looking in a mirror. It’s really seeing the heart of my people.” The reviews were less kind. A *Los Angeles Times* critic described the show as “socially concerned, inbred, proud, nostalgic”—the work of a “stay-with-the-gang subculture.” The final judgment? “That works among the home folks but in a larger world, it’s different.” One conventional way of reading these encounters is as a conflict between artistic quality and the anti-aesthetic of the ethnic artist, who cannot succeed by “merit” and can only thrive through the affirmative action of racial representation. The ethnic artist is essentially interchangeable with any other ethnic artist, being a specimen rather than an artist-hero. Just as one must be critical of meritocracy in the context of higher education, one must also break this opposition between high culture and community art and say that all art is someone’s community art. Artworks that emanate “aesthetic excellence” might simply be understood as community art for a community of globalized elites, highly-educated patrons who have been socialized in the same aesthetic norms. The CARA show had been curated by a forty-person national committee and featured 180 artists, but any work that germinates from a subaltern community will always be portrayed as that of a “stay-with-the-gang subcultures,” because it will deliberately engage with a discourse separate from that of the dominant culture. When this Chicano-produced show visited mainstream museums, Alicia Gaspar de Alba writes, such spaces perpetually negotiated with the show to render it legible to outside audiences. At SF MoMA, curators asked to remove artists’ responses to the word “Chicano,” the show’s own curatorial timelines and placards, and a photo mural of the 1966 United Farm Workers’ march in Sacramento—and even replaced the show’s logo with a more accessible and depoliticized image. Rather than highlighting any singular vision, Gaspar de Alba writes, CARA showcased a *mestizaje* heterogeneity—what she calls, minus the pathological connotations of the words, a cultural schizophrenia. But this internal complexity, this materiality of politics, becomes invisible to one not educated in its contexts, traditions, and politics. It is easier for the critic at the center to identify such work as mute evidence, cultural artifacts that imagine nothing, specimens. We may call this the anthropologizing fallacy. In fact, when the CARA curators sought to tour the exhibition in Spain, the Spanish curators wanted to place the show in an ethnography museum.

The idea of the aesthetic requires the hierarchy between high and low culture, but our human universe throbs with meaning at all points. Everywhere is discourse. Counterculture is a way of naming how ethnic spaces are always already activated

spaces, humming and bustling with creativity and political mobilizations that may not be legible to the outside. To give a more concrete example: I have frequently attended galas by arts groups in ballroom restaurants in Manhattan’s Chinatown. I respect these art groups and think these rentals generate valuable income for the restaurants and yet their relationship is not, of course, a creative partnership. It is a transaction, in which the institution brings capital, both cultural and real, and the restaurant brings low-wage immigrant labor. Unlike a boring palace of globalized wealth, like Cipriani or the Mandarin Oriental, the Chinatown dive can function as performative branding, a way to signal downtown authenticity for the arts organization, while the restaurant itself is coded as a mute place. One can only slum it in a slum. One such gala I went to took place in a restaurant that had already been an activated space: the site of organizing meetings for local movement groups, a banquet hall for weddings, and the home for that weekly Chinese American secular service, Sunday dim sum. Ai Weiwei had once worked as a restaurant deliveryman and his photograph “Chinese New Years on Mott Street 1989” takes place outside the dim sum banquet halls of Jing Fong, perhaps best known for its infinitely elongated mirrored escalators. Even earlier, these streets bustled with Asian American musicians, poets, and visual artists and rival gangs of Maoist agitators. The binary finds itself mirrored in the rise of Chinatown as a site of new galleries, who participate in the gentrifying process and find themselves opposed by the Chinatown Art Brigade, a community art project founded by Tomie Arai, ManSee Kong, and Betty Yu in collaboration with CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities’ Chinatown Tenants Union.

Rather than seeing cultural production as a series of works, one can think of art as comprising all the affects and social relationships that surrounds the artwork like a penumbra. When Rajat Neogy founded the great African journal *Transition*, he did so because he saw editing a magazine as an expression of a culture, as he wrote in his classic 1966 essay, “Do Magazines Culture?”:

True cultural activity is a subterranean process, with the main activity below the visible surface. A literary magazine in this sense must plumb those depths, cast its net deep and wide, and then exhibit the net with its writhing catch to the world outside.... But all this is only one function of a magazine—as an exhibitor. There are much more important ones.... Magazines are also like cultures....

Neogy describes exhibition and publication as artifacts of a hidden culture, which can be progressive, conservative, radical, stagnant, or puritanical. A good magazine recovers gems from the depths of counterculture (what Neogy calls “do cultures”). A bad magazine (what he calls “don’t cultures”) can operate dogmatically, reflect the “qualities of weaknesses of those societies,” or at their worst, serve simply as “showcases for the imbecilities of their editors.” But what happens if we think of artistic creation itself in these terms? When one initially consults histories of movements, whether artistic or political, the reading experience often feels frustratingly external: a list of places and organizations that once existed—just proper nouns, stripped of the brio and romantic subjectivity we imagine as artistic ferment. But in actuality it is our social relationships that are real and the artworks that are external. Artworks are letters sent out beyond their point of social origin, objects we receive with their contexts sliced off. A book or an art object can be an epiphenomenon of counterculture: a document that has been decontextualized into an archive, but had originally been a symptom of social relationships.

We typically think of an artist or writer as someone who has created an oeuvre, someone who has constructed beautiful objects or created discrete books. But creativity is social, informed by friends and mentors, one's coordinates of class, race, and gender, and by the audiences and critics we've internalized in our heads. In *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, James C. Scott considers a speech that Martin Luther King Jr. delivered at the Holt Street Baptist Church in 1955. Rosa Parks had recently been convicted, but King had not immediately endorsed the Montgomery bus boycott. A 26-year-old junior minister who saw himself as a future professor, he had not yet become himself. When you read his speech, you can sense him feeling out the church audience and navigating his content in response to the call-and-response. He begins by talking about the nature of legal authority. The crowd is cold, totally silent. He switches tactics and begins to compliment Parks's character. This elicits a few "yeses" from the audience. Now he is getting warmer. Only when he says how exhausted he is by oppression does the audience begin to cheer and applaud. Many commentators say that this moment catalyzed King into becoming the charismatic orator and leader of popular memory. It also tells us something about the role of the charismatic artist. Scott notes that charisma, rather than being a charming self-presentation, is a way of negotiating relationships: "The key condition for charisma is *listening very carefully and responding*. The condition for listening very carefully is a certain dependence on the audience, a certain relationship of power." I often say the arts administrator must listen aggressively, but what if we thought of the artist in the same way: not simply as the one who speaks, but also as the one who listens.

Chantal Mouffe wrote that all art has a political dimension, because all art implies some notion of what "the people" might look like. The ethnic artist, rather than simply being an anthropological subject, possesses a relationship with an ethnic social origin, an ultimately political process of power that formed their race, but this relationship must be understood as indeterminate and complex. We do not need to choose between the white avant-gardist and the authentic person of color, since we can understand the artist of color as already an experimental and politicized being. Consider a poet and performance artist who was central in creating the artistic culture of New York, but is rarely discussed outside of Latinx circles: Pedro Pietri, one of the cofounders of the Nuyorican Poets Café. Pietri has been described as a Dadaist, but one directly informed by the urban spaces of the New York Boricua diaspora. Born in Puerto Rico and raised in an East Harlem housing project, he called these spaces "the nervous breakdown streets / where the mice live like millionaires / and the people do not live at all." In one performance, he set up "El Puerto Rican Embassy" at sites across the city, where he would sing "El Spanglish National Anthem" and distribute passports to this island that still is a colonized territory rather than an American state or a foreign nation. At the height of the AIDS crisis, Pietri carried a cross through the streets of New York and handed out condoms affixed with poems. He performed his most famous work—"Puerto Rican Obituary"—at the Young Lords October 1969 occupation of a Methodist church at 111th Street and Lexington, which organizers renamed the People's Church. As Urayoán Noel writes in *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*, Pietri's work shifted back and forth between two modes that would otherwise seem mutually exclusive: "a documentary poetics of community representation and a shape-shifting poetics that has been variously described as surrealist, absurdist, and irreverent." Like the experimental writers of color mentioned in Cathy Park Hong's "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," Pietri could be imagined as a formal innovator, one of many avant-gardists

who have simply been unacknowledged. But Pietri should not be held out as a lone genius, ready to be decontextualized into a canon. Unlike in the center, where there can often only be one exemplary artist to represent their entire community, in the ethnic counterculture, there is an abundance of artists of color, such a copiousness that one does not have to hang their identification on only one. Pietri's cultural practice is inseparable from the site of Puerto Rican New York, where groups like the Nuyorican Poetry Café and the New Rican Village rose up in the Lower East Side and where the Young Lords once blocked roads by installing four-foot-tall heaps of garbage to force city sanitation services to clean up East Harlem.

Nowadays, leftist conventional wisdom characterize the New Left as planting the seeds of a bourgeois political culture too wrapped up in culture and identity, and advocate revisiting the worker-focused institution building of the old left. What is missing, in this account, is organization. In a political context where some leftists deride even mass marches as apolitical, being spontaneous expressions rather than the building of organizational infrastructure, these critics characterize a panoply of social modes (safe spaces, affinity groups, student protests, chosen family, etc.) as trivial distractions. One might more charitably imagine spontaneity and organization as poles of the same continuum of movement building. When one reads *How We Get Free*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's interviews with the members of the Combahee River Collective, the black socialist feminist collective who invented the concept of intersectionality, one is perpetually struck by how their political mobilization arose from their social lives. When Combahee member Barbara Smith, for example, discusses her political awakening, her recollection begins with public sites of socialization (college courses, student groups, the workplace) and ends up becoming both more directed (socialist feminist conferences, women's unions, radical meetings) and more intimate (writing letters to friends, Combahee River Collective retreats, and poetry readings). Smith actually cofounded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press over a phone call with Audre Lorde, who was just about to come up to Boston to read in a poetry reading series dedicated to black women. "Both Demita [Frazier, a fellow Combahee member] and I have never belonged to any party or organized formation," Smith states, but it is hard not to see this constant participation as anything other than political organization. Such social organizing may not replace political organizing, but serves as its necessary precondition. Any spontaneous action, Rodrigo Nunes writes in *Viewpoint* magazine, must start somewhere, springing from the work and planning of some group of people. "Spontaneity," Nunes writes, "does not mean the same behavior actualizing itself at once across a large number of people: it always starts somewhere; there are always some people who organize it." Nunes similarly highlights a different interpretation of Lenin, who is of course the theorist of vanguard centralization, but in Nunes's characterization also someone who realized that organization must begin with the imaginative act of social transformation. Lenin inveighed against what he called the "infatuation with [one's] artisanal limitations," which Nunes describes as "a self-complacent resignation which, rather than striving to enhance *potentia*, ends up presenting powerlessness as a virtue. Against this, Lenin's imperative is: do not give up on your ambition; if you truly believe in your idea of social transformation, go out there and make it happen." It is fitting that the idea of the counterpublic germinated from radical feminism and queer theory, since these projects have consistently interrogated preexisting structures of relation, such as heterosexual marriage, and experimented with new strategies of social being, such as lesbian separatism, childcare collectives, women's health clinics, and gay bars. Just as

feminists have sought to break down the wall between the home space and the public, perhaps such social ways of coming together simply name the organization building that happens in private spaces rather than overt institution building in public; domestic organizing as opposed to organizing that has already been legitimated.

Even the labor and communist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—which were often run by immigrants, poets, and people of color—did not see culture as anathema to organization, but as the social form through which organization could be materialized. Writing of German-American socialists in 1870s Chicago, Paul Buhle writes in *Marxism in the United States*:

So solidly did Chicago Socialists build their larger apparatus that even when faced with mass unemployment in the trades, they held on through their own mutual benefit societies, their social clubs, and their organized Sunday picnics in the country. Free to drink beer away from American blue laws and to engage in comradeship conversation, they resisted for decades the loss of their radical identity. As a recent scholar of German Socialism observes, cultural practice became a political practice, and organization of various kinds was itself a culture.

In the 1930s and 1940s, union culture culminated in the creation of the Cultural Front, which, as Michael Denning writes, sought to build a “proletarian cultural sphere.” Orson Welles, Billie Holiday, and John Steinbeck were only the celebrities of the Popular Front, the prominence of the iceberg curling above the waters. Beyond a few artist icons, the Cultural Front itself fostered spaces for living and recreation for all workers: vacation camps, basketball and softball tournaments, folk festivals, residential labor colleges, pageants, union bookstores, literary study circles, night schools, art exhibits, and gymnasiums. In one of these histories, I recall reading a Trotskyite confessing that, while his politics ran more radical, he hung with the unions because they held the better dances. The seeming superficiality of today’s cultural politics did not cause the left’s decline, but simply represent a symptom of it: in neoliberalism, the lack of mass movements whose infrastructure would convene people in a left counterculture.

The New Left itself was a movement that birthed new organizations. A cultural avant-garde met radical racial liberation movements and the interchange created a fluid anti-institutional space of social collage. Spaces like Saint Mark’s Church served as sites of simultaneity, spaces that contained multitudes. Reverend Michael Allen organized a radical Christian community that combined church services, radical movement building, dance, and artistic activism. The church youth programs provided full-time employment for twenty-five young people. The Black Panthers and Young Lords transformed the basement into a communications center. Archie Shepp—then affiliated with *Umbra*, the journal of the Black Arts Movement—organized free jazz concerts on the lawn. And a profusion of arts groups sprouted up: Theater Genesis, Danspace Project, and of course the Poetry Project. Julie Ault’s *Alternative Art New York 1965–1985* relays the chronology of New Left art as one that begins as critique and ends up in institution building. We read about artists and intellectuals like Faith Ringgold and Lucy Lippard continually protesting the racism and sexism of large museums, who rarely changed in response to institutional critique. Rather, the biggest impact of such artistic organizing seems to come not from reforming dominant institutions, but from galvanizing spontaneous outrage

into the creation of new cultural collectives (Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Art Workers’ Coalition) and new institutions serving women and artist of color (El Museo del Barrio, The Studio Museum in Harlem). While critique still orients one in relationship to the center, the sublimation of critique into positive organization can create a profound artistic democratization. Artists and community members can assume positions of self-organization, taking on roles often taken by museum administrators or by community organizers. One way of thinking about movement history is to imagine it not as documentation, but as a usable history—not fact, but potential. Reading *Alternative Art New York 1965–1985*, one finds a menu of potential practices that could be deployed today: the cooperative gallery run by feminists (A.I.R.); the anti-catalog (Artists Meeting for Cultural Change); gallery as store for political posters and ephemera (Gallery 345); gallery as squatting (ABC No Rio; Bullet Space); performances at street fairs and beaches (Carnival Knowledge); spaces dedicated for experimental work by people of color (Just Above Midtown; Kenkeleba House); insertion of art into lobbies and theatres (Creative Time; Public Art Fund); living archives of POC cultural production (Hatch-Billups Collection); a strike against museums (Art Strike); and performative actions staged at museums (Guerrilla Art Action Group). If in a more institutionalized cultural space, the people are merely an audience that views what the artists have presented, here the people sought to have power with large arts organizations. Art leaked beyond the museum to flow from and into mass mobilizations. Artists became curators. The audience transmuted into a demos.

In Manhattan’s Chinatown, whose streets bulged with thousands of new immigrants a year, many of them undocumented, such artistic organizing took the form of Basement Workshop, the first Asian American cultural organization on the East Coast. Named after its dingy tenement basement home, Basement Workshop produced vibrant new cultural productions (such as “Yellow Pearl,” a box of poems and graphic art, and *Bridge Magazine*, a glossy monthly) and created the Chinatown Study Group, an ambitious immigrant survey project to document the neighborhood’s changing demographics. Other projects included English and citizenship classes, arts workshops, and an Asian American archive. Many Asian American artists came through this space, including Tomie Arai and Jessica Hagedorn, whom we have already mentioned, as well as Danny Ning Tsun Yung, Nina Kuo, Rocky Chin, Chris Iijima, Larry Hama, and many others. Basement’s director was Fay Chiang, a poet, visual artist, and activist. Born in the Bronx to Guangdong immigrants who worked as hand-laundries in East Elmhurst, Queens, Chiang had previously been active in the anti-war movement and the fight to expand ethnic studies in the CUNY system (a struggle we’re still fighting today), but when she came to the Basement Workshop in the fall of 1971, she was amazed. As Karen Ishizuka writes in *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*, Fay “had never seen so many Asian American artists, writers, and musicians in one place before. They were debating—very passionately and heatedly—‘What is Asian America? What does it mean? Who are we?’” Basement Workshop disbanded when Fay left in 1986. One of her last projects consisted of paintings of people who were killed by law enforcement, which the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts exhibited in 2015. When she passed away last October from cancer, I was struck by how forgotten both she and the Basement Workshop had become, even by Asian American artists and writers I knew.

Five years after Basement Workshop disbanded, another Asian American arts organization assembled in a basement: the AAWW, which was founded by Curtis

Chin, Marie Lee, Bino Realuyo, and Christina Chiu. During the intervening time, "Asian American" identity also changed. Asian American Movement activists invented the phrase as a term of political mobilization, one whose first term signaled multiracial coalition ("Asian American" rather than Chinese, Japanese, or Pinoy) and whose second term signaled citizenship ("Asian American" rather than Asian foreigner). In the last half-century, as mass movements declined and immigration law increased the class stratification of the Asian diaspora, the phrase "Asian American" evacuated its political meaning. I would wager that few people wake up and look at the mirror in the morning and say, "I'm Asian American." The term names a demographic fiction, rather than an imaginative self-fashioning. The old national identities glow more seductively. I had mostly experienced the term to refer to anodyne student clubs and corporate affinity groups, until I came into the AAWW and met Asian Americans who were unlike any I had ever encountered: people who were Asian American and also misfits, weirdos, émigré, bohemians, radicals, heirs to other traditions, trying to hustle a horizon beyond a day job. When I met Andrew Hsiao ten years ago, he gave me a name for this: counterculture.

I want to hold up counterculture not as a utopia, but simply another mode of relations, just like all the other problematic ones. Think of counterculture as another way of social being, one in which race functions neither as a wound nor as badge of diversity. In this formulation, perhaps anarchist and romantic, the counterculture sees race not as a lens through which one critiques the center, but as a site where you may create your own work virtuously unseen by that center. This is not to say that the ethnic counterculture is celebratory—if it is positive, it is affirmative because its imaginative emphasis puts forward a positive program of racial justice, since the critical program of anti-racism is already assumed. The counterculture is more contradictory: at once neutral and intimate, structured and anti-institutional. AAWW may or may not be a counterculture, but the experience of creating AAWW has also meant building a positive sense of what "Asian American" might mean. If "Asian American" is a meaningless category, then it is also one continually up for grabs, ready to be given meaning by those who manifest it. One role of a creative organization defined by race is to contest what that racial identity might mean and to invent it. For me, "Asian American" doesn't name a country or race, but two intertwined histories: that of migrant labor importation into this country and that of colonial control in the rest of the world. As A. Sivanandan once wrote, "We are here, because you were there." We can then imagine the "Asian American" as conceptualizing two figures read as enemies of American nationalism: the migrant and the supposed terrorist. The migrant, the enemy within, requires demonization by the ideology of right-wing populism. The so-called terrorist, the enemy without, requires demonization by the ideology of American militarism. The American imagines the terrorist as Muslim, but knows nothing about Islam and so sees the terrorist in a fifth of the world's population. Nationalism is an imaginative act and must be fought by the imagination. Against a revanchist backlash that specifically targets migrants, women, people of color, and Muslims, I have seen the project of AAWW as a place to gather the Other and to say, I will imagine with you.

When I first began working at AAWW, I met writers who were starting up small collectives of Afghan and Iranian writers and offered them our venue. During one of their events, a woman came up to me and said, "Thank you for letting us use your space." I replied, "We are part of the same 'we'!" We can counterpose this word "we" against the word I mentioned earlier, "they." How can we imagine a "we" capacious enough to house the many different communities come through this

space or through this country? Typically, the dominant culture imagines ethnicity as a space of sameness, rather than difference. I remember a writer telling me that, in her creative writing workshop, a white writer asked her, "Don't you get tired writing the same story over and over?"—this despite the fact that her stories featured different characters, plots, and situations. Most ethnic spaces, including AAWW, are sites of juxtaposition, not identity. At AAWW, we imagine a public program as a space of collage. A public program is a tool by which one can create, for just a few hours one night, a social belonging founded on difference. We organize our events around an open line of inquiry, so we can bring together people from different communities, genres, and racial backgrounds—people who share the same project but would not otherwise be in the same room. This strategy is not simply coalitional, but a way of throwing everyone off message and out of any stable status quo, so one cannot resort to the old language and must articulate an opening in this new space. Even when we program events where everyone is from the same ethnic group, this means identity no longer becomes any single person's most identifying feature, so one can forsake the burden to represent. Paradoxically, a seeming sameness is what creates openings for difference.

People often think that AAWW is a place where people come and talk about how "Asian" they are, but this formulation inverts one's relationship to ethnicity, which is typically ascribed from without rather than from within. It is the outside society that obsesses over and interrogates your difference. In a mainstream institution, one's race has a strange ambiguous role. In a predominantly white space, your race renders your face, your skin, and your body into a public space. This difference causes a friction that is sometimes barely visible, other times abrasive. One response is to view race as a box from which one must escape and assimilate into the center. Alternately, race can be something one can claim, sometimes as a pantomime of diversity kitsch one must perform and deploy for maximum benefit—this is one's difference capital. In either circumstance, some part of you has been lost or distorted, covered or overdetermined. In the space of the ethnic counterculture, one can simply exist and create. Or to put it more paradoxically, an ethnic arts space can be where you evaporate your ethnicity. Counterintuitively, the universality of a large arts institution is what renders it provincial, since it cannot organize itself around a discursive goal the way a counterpublic can. They are for everyone, so they cannot possess an intimate relationship with their subjects. Hence, the strange paradox of the "universality" of the ethnic arts space. One might imagine an organization called "the Asian American Writers' Workshop" as intrinsically more limited than that of a large art institution, but the opposite is true. We explore themes of race, migration, and colonialism, which are simply names for the infinite history of the world. The conversation opens in kaleidoscopic directions from Asian anti-blackness to Dalit subway workers, from martial law in the Philippines to the work of avant-garde women poets like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and NourbeSe Philip. The part can be larger than the whole.

Perhaps this paradoxical relationship between the ethnic and the universal can lend some light on a central political question of our time: How we can create a universal moment that also recognizes difference? You can see this thematic writ large across left politics over the last few years: in Occupy's awkward handling of race; in the emphatic declaration that black (rather than all) lives matter; in the initial racial gaffes of Bernie Sanders; in the post-election admonition that we prioritize something called the "white working class" and the concomitant rise of social democratic xenophobia; and in the fire hose of think pieces about the relative primacy of class versus race. In *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben argues for

a community that he calls a "whatever singularity." While I've always imagined this phrase read by Alicia Silverstone's character in *Clueless*, Agamben uses the phrase "whatever" to indicate community built on whatever possibilities one might possess, rather than a single property, such as being French or Muslim. When Agamben argues for a community without essence, representation, or identity, he argues for a vision of community unlike those who imagine that the nation must name one people. Against the unity of the nationalist, Agamben argues for a community of fragments and singularities. Thinking of community in this way requires imagining it as an inherently creative task. Community does not refer to a passive grouping of people who have always existed together. Community is an action, a task of fashioning affiliations to create ways of relating that never existed previously. In a remarkable passage in *Blacks In and Out of the Left*, Michael Dawson interprets the history of black radicalism through the lens of quantum theory. There have been moments in history, he says, where a single present bubbled with multiple futures. This is because the radicals themselves could be multiple people. Claudia Jones could connect black and feminist movements across the Atlantic. Paul Robeson could exist in both the culture industry and an anti-colonial internationalism, in labor unionism and civil rights. If a particle can exist in superposition in more than one location at the same time, then a person can also become entangled in multiple spaces, vibrating with potential. As Agamben might say, figures like Jones and Robeson did not represent any single community that already existed. Rather they were unworking the stable collectivities that existed and weaving affinities between spaces that would not have imagined themselves together.

Sometimes I think one of our goals at AAWW has been to create the person who would come to our space, to invent the subject for whom arts and politics do not repel each other like the allergic poles of a magnet, to imagine the person without essence. If AAWW is a space dedicated to discourse without essence, we have situated ourselves between arts and social justice, at once more politicized than many arts groups, but more porous and useless than many political groups. What I am about to say will sound strange, particularly since I have been writing a paean to this bohemian demimonde, but this floating along in this liminal space sometimes makes me feel lonely, since we are neither one place nor the other. But as the years go on, I find this nowhere to be the most satisfying location. One can find it challenging to describe this more intuitive, social approach to politics, where the collision of literature and community can dilate the aperture of meaning, so that ideas can flow out that are neither right nor wrong, good nor bad. Poetry, it has been famously said, makes nothing happen, but how might one characterize the utility of nothing? This essay has been an attempt to assess the utility of useless activities, like art and friendship. In the lexicon of political change, a counterculture is a type of nothing. It differs from a campaign, a political party, or a union, since, for better or worse, it possesses no goal. What it might possess instead is what Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery have called "joyful militancy." In their imagining, joy refers not to the affect of simple happiness (which would be a something, an essence) but to an elevation in one's ability to exercise all of ones affects. Such joy does not produce moral or political certainty (another something, another essence!), just as a counterculture does not prescribe any specific way of being a person. But a counterculture can suggest the fecund nothing of social transformations, a strange impossible community that seeks not any specific emotion or goal but joy, the affect of possibility.

In trying to name the utility of community and the imaginative porousness that community can germinate, I've tried to haphazardly summarize the social life

of so many wildly different moments across time and space, an approach less like movement history than (to cheekily lift a genre from alt-weekly journalism) a series of capsule reviews. This frenetic synopticism is inherently limited. Fumes of paradox can mist up when you try to theorize a social space. You pry from its context something that is only context. In a counterculture, you can swim through the social ether, unmoored from your self, at once public and intimate, swimming through a veiled zone of hidden knowledge and friendships. Your relationship to the place takes place in your body. You can come to a space, negotiate it, meet future friends, share a sandwich, hang out, leave, come back, fall in love, snag a cigarette, meet a stranger, hug someone, hate someone, interrupt, organize an event, make awkward small talk with someone you'd only met in this space, head to dinner afterwards, listen, help set up plastic cups, defend someone, introduce your roommate, be shy, make something together, laugh, exchange contact info, gossip, recommend music, bring your mother-in-law, recognize someone across the room, accidentally spill something. Navigating a communal geography differs from reading a text, purchasing a commodity, or from the self-consciousness of social media. You navigate a material place in the time of your body, rather than emitting dispatches into a dematerialized zone of no context. You are public, but not displayed, surveilled, and archived. You relate to others spontaneously, without any obligation to perform or expose yourself. Your self can stretch to its full social mobility, rather than indexing itself into the narrow confines of text. Ideology, politics, taste, and social media—these fixities can be a Procrustean bed that crams your whole self into a shrunken modality of positions and transactional messages, but most interesting interactions we have in life are not when we are "on." Life happens when you are not making declarations. Life happens when you are with other people. So do new openings for your aesthetics and your politics.