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'Alicia Garza combines immense wisdom with political courage to inspire a new generation of activists, dreamers and leaders . . . *The Purpose of Power* offers a new model of organizing that makes room for those willing to learn. People like Alicia have been speaking up for decades. If we want to turn protest into substantive change, it's about time we finally listened.' David Lammy, MP

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THE PURPOSE OF POWER

HOW TO BUILD MOVEMENTS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

ALICIA GARZA

Foreword by Rashad Robinson

BLACK SWAN

CHAPTER THREE

FIRST LESSONS

ORGANIZING IS THE PROCESS OF COMING TOGETHER WITH other people who share your concerns and values to work toward a change in some kind of policy, usually of the government, but also of universities, private companies, and other institutions whose policies affect and shape our lives. Organizing has been a part of who I am ever since I can remember, although for a long time I didn't call it by that name—I thought I was just working with other people to solve the problems that impacted our lives. For me, organizing is as much about human connection and building relationships as it is about achieving a political goal. The work feeds me. It's embedded in who I am. But the idea of building relationships with our neighbors and others in order to accomplish things in the world is embedded in all of our lives: It's part of all the things we do every day to survive, to feed ourselves, to express ourselves, to restore ourselves. Humans are social creatures; connection is at the core of who we

are. And organizing is connecting with a purpose. When we connect to others, we learn about them and about ourselves. And that understanding is the beginning of real political change.

Part of my motivation for organizing was a desire not to feel alone in the world. To know that there are people out there who are experiencing similar things, are facing similar questions and contradictions, and who know deep inside that the way things are isn't the way they have to be. Everyone finds that primary point of connection in different places. For some activists and organizers, that connection is found in a shared concern or problem. For others, it is found in a shared vision for what's possible. For me, it's a little bit of both: the process of getting from a connection found in a shared problem or concern to a connection about a shared vision for what is possible—from a shared problem to a shared future.

That's a journey you can't make alone. Growing up as a Black girl in Marin County, a predominantly white suburb of San Francisco, I regularly experienced what it was like to be the "only one" and what being the only one meant for the prospects of my survival. I was an only child until I was eight. I was often the only or one of the only Black children in my schools, in my neighborhood, in my family. I lived in a world that rewarded conformity, but I never felt the same as most of the people I grew up with and around. I knew how it felt to be treated differently, but I had a sense that it wasn't something you could do much about.

Being Black in a predominantly white environment, I experienced all the ways that Blackness was penalized: I had to deal with beauty standards that excluded me, unfair racialized accusations and microaggressions from authority figures, and teachers who assumed I wasn't smart or capable, policed my relationships with my classmates—in particular when it came to gender and sexuality—and affixed racist stereotypes and ignorance to my

very existence. I had a teacher in fifth grade who asked me if the bottoms of my feet were as light as the palms of my hands.

But it was more complicated than that. My Blackness was both demonized and romanticized. I was often the only Black person my friends knew, and I wasn't like the Black people they saw on television or whose music they listened to—this confused them. I knew that the things that gave me currency among white students—my straightened hair, my proximity to white wealth and privilege, the resources that allowed me to excel academically—were not always accessible to my few Black peers. I saw how some forms of social currency changed how people perceived my Blackness; I also saw how my Blackness changed how much value that social currency gave me. This introduced me to the truth that while each of us carries the particular privileges and burdens of our individual lives, those burdens are dramatically shaped by race, gender, class, citizenship, sexuality, disability, and other features of our identity.

Once I started college, at the University of California, San Diego, I experienced for the first time what being different meant on a much more intimate level—what it meant for my own survival. I moved from a small, polite environment where everyone sort of knew one another to an environment that was bigger, much less connected, and more socially diverse. For the first time, I was seeing myself in my environment while at the same time feeling very alienated from it. There were still only a small number of Black people in my university but enough that being different wasn't such a lonely burden to bear.

The strange reality that I was living in began to make sense when I was introduced to Black feminist thought. I learned that I wasn't the only one who felt this alienated. Black feminists had been writing about Black women and belonging in a world that

was mostly shaped around the preferences, tastes, and other norms of white people and whiteness—a world that included that very college I was attending. It was there that I was exposed to different ways of thinking about why the world functions the way it does and different methods for achieving change. I learned from queer Black women and other queer women of color—my peers and teachers and creators of the art and literature I devoured. I read everything I could get my hands on by Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Cherríe Moraga, and Patricia Hill Collins. For the first time, I had Black teachers, some of whom were queer. I began to understand that difference was a source of strength and power, that being on the outside provided a different vantage point—one with potentially more range and insight. The world revealed itself in fresh ways, and I wanted to know more. I decided to major in anthropology and sociology—I wanted to immerse myself in people and culture.

I also learned about how relationships of power were shaped by race, class, gender, and sexuality. I worked at the student health center on campus, doing HIV testing and counseling as well as pregnancy prevention; I joined a student organization that was connected to Planned Parenthood; and I sat on the board of an organization designed to support gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. I was also learning about Margaret Sanger, who pushed eugenics as a way to build support for the birth control pill. When our local office of Planned Parenthood celebrated Margaret Sanger Day, I not only refused to participate but understood more clearly that everything in our lives is shaped by these factors, and my life was no different.

When I graduated from college, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do next. I felt like I was still learning about the world and wasn't quite ready to make a decision on what I would be doing

with the rest of my life. I wanted to move back home to the Bay Area. I'd had enough of Southern California. I was in a relationship with someone who still had another year to go at UC Santa Cruz and I wanted to be closer to them. I applied to a number of programs that focused on youth, including Teach For America and AmeriCorps. I was accepted to both, but the AmeriCorps job was in Daly City in the Bay Area, doing what I most wanted to do, working with youth of color.

The novelty wore off pretty quickly. The program paid a mere $12,000 a year for full-time employment, with the promise of a $25,000 tuition award at the end of a year. After getting oriented to the program, we were promptly taken to the welfare office to sign up for food stamps. I worked for my parents at their antiques store and took a contract teaching job at a middle school in Oakland to supplement my income. Still, I was always broke. My roommate, a friend from Marin County, had wealthy parents whose money helped subsidize us both.

For a year, through AmeriCorps, I worked at a health clinic providing HIV/AIDS and pregnancy testing and counseling to young people in Daly City. I also helped support a related violence-prevention program. I volunteered at an organization to end sexual violence called San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR) and participated as a peer counselor, facilitator, hotline volunteer, and medical advocate for people who'd experienced violence. As I did these jobs, I once again became aware of the contradictions within many of these efforts. I was getting to work directly with youth of color, in an organization that was mostly staffed by people of color, and yet most of the teachers and administrators were white. Some of the frameworks that we used seemed to perpetuate a "savior complex" as opposed to enabling and empowering young people to make the decisions that were best for them. Some people in the organization would describe issues like young girls dating men at least ten years their

senior as "cultural norms," sounding more like tourists or anthropologists than members of these communities.

My volunteer duties at SFWAR felt more aligned with my emerging sense of politics, but they also helped shape my understanding of my own identity: Most of the staff was queer and of color. Being in that environment helped me explore my own sexuality, as I found myself attracted to and attractive to dykes and butches and trans people. During our training as volunteers, we learned about various systems of oppression—much as I had in college—but this learning was not academic; it wasn't detached from our own experiences. We were seeing how those systems functioned on the ground, in people's real lives—in our lives.

SFWAR was going through a transition: It was trying to move from a one-way organization that simply provided services in response to a pressing need to one that had a two-way relationship with the people who received them—both providing services and learning from, adapting to, and integrating the recipients into the process. This shift brought with it some upheaval, internally and externally. There wasn't a clear agreement internally about which direction to head in. Having taken on a more explicitly political stance, SFWAR was being attacked from the outside—and the work itself was hard enough without the added stress of death threats coming through our switchboard or funders threatening to withdraw.

The more I looked, the harder it was to ignore that many of the organizations and efforts I'd become a part of and invested my time and passion into had never intended to include people like me in the first place—or only allowed our entry on terms that were not dignified. I became disillusioned about change and activism; I felt isolated and unsure. Before, the loneliness was comforting to me—in some ways, it was self-righteous. Now the loneliness was different.

. . .

My time at SFWAR was coming to a close, and one day I received a notice on a listserv I belonged to advertising a training program for developing organizers. They were looking for young people, ages eighteen to thirty, to apply to participate in an eight-week program that promised "political education trainings" and "organizing intensives." Each person selected would be placed in a community-based organization for training, and many organizations were inclined to hire the interns if their time during the summer proved successful. I wasn't sure what my next steps were after AmeriCorps and SFWAR, and the program sounded interesting to me, so I decided to apply. I was accepted.

The program had a rigor that I craved. Each day we were expected to show up on time and prepared. The political education trainings were engaging yet challenging. Two days a week, we read political theorists and explored topics like capitalism and imperialism, patriarchy and homophobia, and the history of social movements. The other days, we would work in community-based grassroots organizations. We were given a small stipend to live off during those eight weeks, while putting in what would sometimes be ten-to-twelve-hour days. We would also have weekly check-ins with the lead trainers to review what we were learning and troubleshoot any challenges.

Many of us were paired with another participant in the program; I was paired with a young Afro Puerto Rican gay man from Chicago who'd just done a six-month stint living in a tree in order to protect it from developers. His father was a police officer, but he was a free spirit who smoked a lot of weed, didn't wear underwear, and ate garlic rather than wearing deodorant. Each day we would go to the storefront where the organization was located, do role-plays on organizing with the staff, and then head out to West Oakland to knock on doors.

We were looking for people who wanted to get organized in response to a plan announced by the mayor to move 10,000 new residents into downtown Oakland in ten years. West Oakland is adjacent to downtown, so moving new residents into downtown really meant increased development and real estate speculation in West Oakland. Many of the residents of West Oakland at that time were poor or working middle class. Scores of elderly residents had been in those communities for decades, ever since the wartime boom encouraged them to move west from Louisiana, Mississippi, and other southern states. It was our goal to recruit one hundred West Oakland residents to participate in a community meeting to talk about the plans and their impact on the community and to build strategies to bring the community's influence to bear.

That summer, we talked to more than a thousand people. Our method was simply going door to door. My internship partner wasn't big on door knocking. As I would knock on each door and talk with residents, he could often be found smoking a cigarette outside or sitting on the curb, picking weeds and wildflowers and turning them into jewelry. But I loved it.

I started to feel fed again. Each door I knocked on reminded me of a family member, and each conversation taught me that much more about myself and the world around me. I learned how to really listen for what was underneath "No, I don't think I can make it" or "I need to give my kids a bath that night" or "Sure, I'll try to stop by." Everything that was not "Yes, I will definitely be there" was an opportunity to get them there eventually. We would learn about each other's families, our experiences in politics and activism, and each other. I spent countless hours in kitchens and living rooms, on crowded couches and porches, and in backyards. I learned how to engage other people in the slow process of changing the world.

Before the summer was out, I was offered a job, which I gladly accepted. I'd become hooked on organizing, obsessed with political theory, and committed to the work. I threw myself headfirst into it and moved from my much-too-expensive apartment in San Francisco to Oakland.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FIRST FIGHT

MUCH OF WHAT I KNOW ABOUT MOVEMENT BUILDING, I learned by organizing in Black communities. And Bayview Hunters Point is where I learned to organize—the site of some of my most cherished moments of human connection and my most painful lessons about how power really operates. It was in Bayview Hunters Point where I learned to love the hardest, and it is where my heart was broken over and over again.

Organizing is about building relationships and using those relationships to accomplish together what we cannot accomplish on our own—but there's more to it than that. The mission and purpose of organizing is to build power. Without power, we are unable to change conditions in our communities that hurt us. A movement is successful if it transforms the dynamics and relationships of power—from power being concentrated in the hands of a few to power being held by many.

Most people, when they think about power, are actually envisioning empowerment. I think those things are related, but

different. Power is the ability to impact and affect the conditions of your own life and the lives of others. Empowerment, on the other hand, is feeling good about yourself, akin to having high self-esteem. Empowerment is what happens when people come together and don't feel alone anymore and don't feel like they're the only ones who experience what they do. Unless empowerment is transformed into power, not much will change about our environments. It's power that determines whether or not a community will be gentrified, a school district funded, a family provided with quality healthcare that is affordable on any budget.

Organizing in Bayview Hunters Point taught me a lot about power—what it is, what it isn't, how it operates, how it can be challenged, and how it can be transformed. Through a decade of organizing in this small but mighty community, I learned lessons that were valuable not just to the project of building power in San Francisco but to the larger project of building movements across the nation.

Community organizing is often romanticized, but the actual work is about tenacity, perseverance, and commitment. It's not the same as being a pundit, declaring your opinions and commentary about the world's events on your social media platforms. Community organizing is the messy work of bringing people together, from different backgrounds and experiences, to change the conditions they are living in. It is the work of building relationships among people who may believe they have nothing in common so that together they can achieve a common goal. That means that as an organizer, you help different parts of the community learn about one another's histories and embrace one another's humanity as an incentive to fight together. An organizer challenges their own faults and deficiencies while encouraging others to challenge theirs. An organizer

works well in groups and alone. Organizers are engaged in solving the ongoing puzzle of how to build enough power to change the conditions that keep people in misery.

An organizer is simultaneously selfless and selfish. They are selfless because they know that sparking a desire for justice requires they do more listening than talking, more stepping back so others may step forward. They are selfish because, in doing for others, they are feeding themselves. Unlocking a hunger for social change inside someone else is strangely rewarding. It is a confirmation that the countless hours you spend trying to untangle that knot are worthwhile. An organizer gets high off motivating others to take action.

In 2005, I joined a small grassroots organization called People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER) to help start a new organizing project focused on improving the lives of Black residents in the largest remaining Black community in San Francisco.

I'd been following POWER for a long time. It was founded in 1997 with the mission to "end poverty and oppression once and for all." POWER was best known for its work to raise the minimum wage in San Francisco to what was, at the time, the highest in the country, and for its resistance to so-called welfare reform, which it dubbed "welfare deform." POWER was unique among grassroots organizations in San Francisco because of its explicit focus on Black communities. That was one of the aspects that attracted me to the organization's work. POWER was everything I was looking for in an organization at that point in my life—a place where I could learn, a place where I would be trained in the craft of organizing and in the science of politics, and a place where I didn't have to leave my beliefs, my values, and my politics at the door each day when I went to work.

Joining POWER would change how I thought about organizing forever.

I had very little understanding of how to start a campaign when I joined the staff at POWER—but I didn't have to figure it out on my own. Soon after I started, a co-worker broke it down for me: "Starting a campaign is like starting a fistfight. Sometimes you just need to punch someone in the face, step back, and see what happens." Well, I'd never been in a fistfight, but I could understand the approach, theoretically.

We were looking for Black people who wanted to organize to make San Francisco a better place for our communities—but the problem was, the Black community in San Francisco was diminishing at a rapid pace. In 1970, the Black population in San Francisco was 13.4 percent; by the time I'd started at POWER in 2005, the Black population had dropped by more than half, to 6.5 percent. Redevelopment activities, sometimes called urban renewal (or "Negro removal," as some Black folks had dubbed it), had transformed San Francisco's once bustling and thriving Black district called the Fillmore into a playground for young, wealthy white professionals with families. Many who were displaced from the Fillmore District relocated to Bayview Hunters Point, a small community in the southeastern section of the city.

Bayview Hunters Point didn't exist on tourist maps; it was often a shaded-out section, stretched wide along the southern edge of the city like an extended hand. Bayview Hunters Point contained most of the Black people who remained in San Francisco, with a few remaining in the Tenderloin, Lakeview, and scattered Fillmore neighborhoods.

As a teenager, I'd made a few clandestine excursions to the neighborhood, but I'd never spent much time there as an adult.

It struck me as relatively isolated. It had once been home to a commercial shipyard, which was later taken over by the U.S. Navy, a power plant, and shrimping businesses. Large, nondescript rectangular buildings with few windows characterized a significant portion of the community, surrounding an inner core of Victorian-style single-family homes. The best views were reserved for the public housing residents, perched on top of a hill overlooking the San Francisco Bay on one side and the rest of the city, from the Mission District to downtown, on the other. The Hill was home to the highest concentration of public housing in the entire city, above the infamous Hunters Point Naval Shipyard. The community was relatively small, the sort of place where everyone seemed to know everyone. When I traveled around the area, it wasn't uncommon for me to be stopped by someone asking what part of the neighborhood I was from—it would happen when I was walking down the street or if I was in a car, stopped at a traffic light.

Years of disinvestment and neglect had left this neighborhood fundamentally ravaged, but it was sitting on some of the best land in the city, along with some of the best weather. While San Francisco was known for its fog, Bayview Hunters Point got sunshine, thanks to the microclimates that characterize the Bay Area.

Quietly, developers and city officials began discussing and planning for a massive redevelopment project with Bayview Hunters Point as its epicenter. It was to become the largest redevelopment project in the history of San Francisco.

Gentrification had become synonymous with development in our city. Coffee shops, beer gardens, high-end boutiques, and specialty grocery stores often came with eviction notices, "right to return" vouchers that somehow were never redeemed, increased police presence, and the flight of poor and working-class families, mostly Black and brown, who could not afford the

amenities that came with the new residents seeking San Francisco's hottest new neighborhood.

Our work to build an organizing project to improve life for the city's Black communities began with learning more about how people in the community were experiencing the silent but persistent efforts by the city and developers to transform their neighborhood. We went from house to house and attended city-sponsored community meetings on the redevelopment activities. But we also joined meetings with organizations working on other issues, from fighting to clean up the toxic environment of the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, created by industries that flouted regulations and improperly disposed of hazardous materials, to groups working to empower youth to be change makers. As a group coming from outside the neighborhood, we realized we had to gain the approval of the community. We needed to hear that the residents wanted us to be there and saw some value in our presence.

We certainly weren't the first organization of our kind in Bayview Hunters Point. Plenty of people had been involved in community organizations of some sort, whether it was church groups that supported the poor or groups devoted to racial empowerment like the Nation of Islam. What the community didn't have was power. While organizations were plentiful, none could change what was happening to their community, at least not on their own.

I would spend my afternoons going from house to house, sitting with folks at a kitchen table or leaning on a porch, talking with a resident as they peered through a thick screen door at me. I would run through a set of questions designed to get to know them better and learn more about what they cared about.

How long have you lived in this community? What do you like about it?

Have you noticed any changes? What are you seeing?

Did you know that Bayview Hunters Point is now a redevelopment project? How do you feel about the changes happening in the community?

What kinds of changes do you think need to happen in this community? Do you think the city wants the same changes?

Why do you think the city wants to make changes here now?

Who do you think these changes are for?

What do you think it would take to get the changes here that the community wants?

Do you want to be a part of an organization that is fighting to make sure all of the changes that happen in this community are for the benefit of this community?

Over the course of a few months, I had a couple hundred of these conversations with residents throughout the community. I talked to middle-class families trying to stay in the neighborhood. I talked to people who'd grown up in the neighborhood and had inherited their homes from their parents or grandparents but were struggling to hold on to them. I talked to families living in public housing and young people who were gang-affiliated. I talked with pastors and I talked with elders. I talked with people who worked at local service agencies, clinics, and libraries. I talked with business owners and workers. I got to know the names of grandchildren and pets, and eventually I started to be invited off the porch and into the home. Soon, the people behind those doors we knocked on became familiar faces who would attend and plan neighborhood meetings to address their concerns.

San Francisco has never been a city that is friendly to Black people, but that hasn't stopped individual Black people from having and wielding power there—some on behalf of the most vulnerable residents, and others on behalf of the powerful interests that preyed on the most vulnerable. It was as if some had adopted the notion of eat or be eaten when it came to that community. Some leaders could deliver a good talk, laced with grandeur about Black power, and as soon as the applause died down, turn around and take a payment from a corporation to advocate for something damaging to the community.

I realized there were two kinds of leaders, and I started to identify them by name and reputation. Some, like Elouise Westbrook, Espanola Jackson, and Enola Maxwell, were considered the mothers of the community. They worked on behalf of and with the Black women who lived in public housing and were recipients of general assistance to bring more resources to the residents in the form of childcare, affordable housing, and jobs.

And then there were those who sought to wield influence through their relationships with corporations and developers. Under the administration of then-mayor Willie Brown, Jr., a powerful figure in both municipal and state politics, many Black people were given patronage jobs in exchange for support of projects that often benefited powerful interests. After Brown completed his second term as mayor, some of these same people became "community consultants" for companies like Pacific Gas and Electric, while others headed city departments like the Department of Sanitation or occupied posts on boards and commissions like the Redevelopment Agency. It was this crew that greased the wheels for the major redevelopment programs that would displace the Black voters these same people had entered politics to represent.

When I talked to people from other parts of San Francisco about Bayview, I'd hear all kinds of stories—you would think the neighborhood was simply full of guns, drugs, and gangs. But there was nothing simple about the Bayview I discovered. There

were Black families, Southeast Asian families, Latino families, and white families. There were young people and elders, and no one fit a stereotype. Someone who might be labeled a drug dealer went to church each and every Sunday, and even if they did sell drugs, they also helped elderly women with their groceries. An older woman could be dressed to the nines every day and yet have no food in her refrigerator and no one to visit her. You could walk past a crew of young men shooting dice and find out they were discussing a new policy the mayor was pushing. I would find out more and more about this community each day I walked the streets and knocked on doors, sometimes until it was dark. I knocked on thousands of doors, and never did I feel unsafe.

The first campaign we worked on involved a community beautification project called underground wiring, which required each residential property to pay up to $1,400 to place the utility wires that crisscrossed the area above their homes beneath the streets instead. Residents who were unable to pay could be subject to having a lien placed on their home. The City and County of San Francisco sent letters to each homeowner in Bayview Hunters Point giving instructions on how to complete the work. Households that didn't comply received increasingly threatening letters. At some homes I visited, householders would come to the door with the opened envelope in their hand, confused about why they were being required to pay for something that was billed as a city beautification project. To make matters worse, the median income in the neighborhood at that time was approximately $40,000, half the citywide median income. For many who were just barely making it, $1,400 was a steep bill to pay.

The city had a program that would help residents in need to pay for the "undergrounding"—but the program only had enough money for a few residents to take advantage of it. Most

residents had no idea that the program existed, and the city didn't do much to publicize it. We immediately went to work making sure each resident knew there was a program that would pay for the underground wiring, and we began organizing residents around the project.

Most of the people we talked to were angry that the city was threatening residents with a lien on their homes. Longtime residents were able to draw parallels between the Negro removal of the 1950s and the new redevelopment projects that were coming to their neighborhood. Our community meetings quickly grew from a dozen or so participants to between seventy-five and one hundred residents per meeting.

Meetings always included food, childcare, and translation, and at that time most were held in the community room of the local library. Miss Linda, the librarian, was appreciative of the efforts being made to organize the community to fight back effectively against an onslaught of corporate-led development. She ensured that the community room was available on the third Saturday of each month.

Our physical office was located in the Mid-Market area of San Francisco, next to an old Greyhound station that was eventually converted into the city's Department of Homeland Security office, above a methadone clinic that served the many addicts who populated the streets, and just a few short blocks from City Hall. From our offices, Bayview Hunters Point was a twenty-three-minute drive by car and approximately an hour by bus—a distance of four and a half miles. The city's subway system didn't serve Bayview, so transportation was a big part of what cut residents off from jobs and other opportunities.

To set up our community meetings, I'd have to get up early on a Saturday and commute from my apartment in East Oakland to our office in San Francisco for the meeting supplies and materials, picking up two to three members along the way; we'd

arrive at the library about an hour before the meeting to set up. We often put together the agenda for the meeting with our members, most of whom were seniors in the community, people on fixed incomes, and those who couldn't afford to pay for the project and were now faced with eviction because of a lien. Together, we'd figure out what we needed to accomplish and strategize an approach to tackle our problem.

In time, we developed a set of demands for the city related to the underground-wiring project. We called them "demands" because we wanted to be clear that we wouldn't give up on them without a fight. We demanded that the city pay the wiring cost for every resident who could prove they made at or below the neighborhood median income of $40,000 per year; we demanded the city hold community meetings to inform people of the program; and we demanded that they remove the threat of placing a lien on someone's home for not being able to pay the cost of the underground wiring.

We next set up meetings with city administrators, many of whom weren't sympathetic at first—they'd hear us out but then respond with a shrug: "Sorry, there's not much we can do." One day, we decided to perform a direct action: We brought approximately fifteen seniors to the office overseeing the project and chanted in the waiting room about the racism of the program, demanding to see the head of the department. We left within two hours—victorious. The city had agreed to our conditions. They would accept every application for the subsidy program, as long as the applicant could prove that their income was at or below $40,000 per year.

Immediately, we got to work setting up community clinics where people could come to get support on their subsidy applications. All in all, we convinced the city to increase the program budget by $750,000 to cover every resident who wanted to take advantage of it. It was our first big win, and now we were

making waves in the community—including among some of the neighborhood's longtime power brokers.

At POWER, we'd accomplished our goal of getting the city to pay for the improvements that it sought to impose on residents. It wasn't freedom, but it was something that was widely and deeply felt, particularly by low-income seniors in the neighborhood. The way we accomplished it was also important: The campaign was a good example of how to use escalating tactics to put pressure on people with power. We used direct action when meetings alone proved ineffective. Bringing the people who were affected face-to-face with the people who were making decisions over their lives also helped make visible who made those decisions and why they made decisions the way they did—without community input or consultation, and without concern for how their decisions would impact the people they were making decisions about. It helped clarify what was at stake—if the people in the community who were most vulnerable to the negative impacts of redeveloping their neighborhood were not involved in shaping those decisions or how they were implemented, the people who needed that development the most would not benefit from it. Together, the informational meetings and the confrontations politicized the community members who were involved. The city called the project a beautification program that would improve the quality of life in the neighborhood—but through meetings and pressure we exposed its real agenda, which was to improve the quality of life for prospective residents at the expense of existing residents.

By 2007, POWER joined a neighborhood coalition that had come together to organize residents of the community to ensure

that the development project slated for the neighborhood would benefit people currently living there, not just the residents the city was trying to attract. Our coalition was approached by a progressive member of the Board of Supervisors about a campaign idea he had that would win guaranteed benefits for Bayview residents. By then we'd built a relatively strong base of community members who were now active in the fight to take back their neighborhood. Our community meetings were robust and consistent, averaging about fifty people each month.

Chris Daly was a controversial figure on the board, to say the least. Daly was a white, Duke-educated cisgender male who was unconcerned with convention or compromise. Daly had entered San Francisco city politics through his work with people who were homeless and those who received some sort of government assistance. His election to the board set the stage for the election of several other progressive supervisors; as a relatively senior member, Daly was an important, if volatile, part of a progressive majority. He had developers and corporations who were bad actors in his sights—and he was more than happy not just to be vocal about that but to try to maneuver policy so that developers and corporations had to pay their fair share.

When we met, he pitched the idea of creating a ballot measure to require that half of all new housing built in the redevelopment zone be made affordable to people in the community at or below the neighborhood median income, which was still hovering around $40,000 a year. For context, that year the median income for the region was a little bit above $100,000 a year. This approach would force the redevelopment project to increase affordable housing units to more than the 15 percent required by state law, and even higher than the 25 percent that had become the norm in other municipalities. It would have been a lifesaver for San Franciscans, many of whom, like me, were

being priced out of the city or were close to being unable to afford housing.

There was a catch, however: To move forward, we had to gather signatures to qualify the measure for the upcoming election, which would be held in June of the following year. That meant we needed 8,000 signatures by the deadline, in less than three weeks. Anyone who signed our measure had to already be registered to vote. And if we got the signatures we needed and qualified to be on the ballot, we still had to campaign for the measure to pass in the general election. To win, we would need about five times more votes than signatures—40,000, give or take.

Our coalition loved the idea of the initiative but was skeptical about our ability to pull it off. POWER hadn't done much electoral organizing on its own, much less led and anchored that kind of campaign. Would we be able to collect that many signatures? Was what we were proposing with the measure even possible—could you make it a rule that the housing built in the largest development project the city had ever seen be made affordable to people who were low-income? How would we get the resources to run such a campaign? We were a small, underfunded grassroots organization with explicitly radical politics, and much of our work with elected officials was confrontational, which some elected officials were turned off by—especially if they were the target of it. From a certain perspective, you could say our electoral work was mostly making the mayor and other city officials angry and vengeful when we targeted them and exposed their unholy alliance with the rich and powerful. Not quite the same kind of project as building a coalition for a citywide campaign with groups and individuals who didn't share our politics and didn't all agree with our strategies.

But we still thought it was a great idea—and could see a

fuzzy path to success. Daly had relationships with people who had resources they were willing to contribute to help us get the campaign started. One person he knew was willing to give us a free version of the voter database created by NGP VAN, a technology provider to Democratic and progressive campaigns and organizations, to make sure every signer was a registered voter. We had a robust network of volunteers who would be willing to help gather the signatures needed. We'd begun working closely with the Nation of Islam, environmental justice organizations like Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice and the Sierra Club, and other faith-based organizers who would lend their support. After talking with our coalition partners, as well as the membership that POWER had built in the neighborhood, and debating the best approach, we decided to give it a shot.

Quickly, we calculated what it would take to get to 8,000 valid signatures, breaking it down by number of shifts, people required to fill those shifts, and signatures per hour needed to reach our goal. We mapped out locations across the city where we thought we'd have the best chance of success. And we set up daily shifts of volunteers who would use the few computers in our office to check each signature as it came in. I drew a thermometer on a large piece of butcher paper to track our progress. If we exceeded 8,000 by a margin of error that could account for invalid signatures, we would be in business. So we set out to collect 10,000 signatures—and we had two weeks to do it.

Weekdays were slow, and at first the signatures trickled in. But when we hit the weekend, things started to move. We set up petition stations at grocery stores around the city, with a focus on working-class neighborhoods. We knocked on doors throughout Bayview Hunters Point. Even though we knew this was a slower and less effective way to collect the signatures than street canvassing, we thought it was important to deeply engage community residents with the most at stake—they, of all people, would be motivated by the idea that half of all new housing built in the zone would be affordable to people who lived in the community.

Each day, we gave four-hour shifts to our volunteers. When they came to the office, they picked up materials—a clipboard, a few sheets of the petition, and information on the next membership meeting. For those who weren't familiar with canvassing, we conducted an orientation that covered the goals and objectives of the organization, the goals and objectives of the campaign, and things to look out for while gathering signatures. If a petition sheet came back completed, the signatures were checked immediately to ensure that the people who signed were registered voters in the City and County of San Francisco. We were assisted by members of the Nation of Islam, who, I noticed, mobilized quickly and efficiently.

At the end of ten days, we had collected 11,414 signatures. Now there was another step—having the city attorney certify the results. Just as we'd done with the signature collection, we set up shifts of volunteers, this time to observe employees in the city attorney's office as they checked each signature for validity. We weren't ready to let all that hard work get swept under the rug by political calculations behind the scenes. And just like that, the first improbable step was completed: In November 2007, we qualified the measure for the ballot. The general election would be held in June 2008. A combination of faith, hard work, and extended networks had brought us the initial victory—but how were we going to pull off the rest? There was no time to celebrate. Our coalition had six months to convince voters in San Francisco to pass the measure.

Our measure had been assigned the letter "F," and thus the Proposition F campaign had begun. We decided the "F" stood for Families, Fairness, and the Future.

. . .

Of course, there were people working just as hard—and with vastly greater resources—on the other side of the question. Our ballot measure was set to throw a serious wrench into the plans of a multibillion-dollar developer that had its eyes on Bayview Hunters Point: the Lennar Corporation.

Lennar was carefully working through a plan to take Bayview Hunters Point and turn it into San Francisco's hottest new neighborhood. The first step in its plan was to acquire the land for next to nothing and have the city roll out a red carpet of benefits and tax breaks in exchange for Lennar's work to develop and sell a neighborhood that was seen as undesirable. The city came through on that part: It sold eight hundred acres of waterfront land to the Lennar Corporation for one dollar. Why so cheap? Some of the land was contaminated with toxins.

Bayview Hunters Point was formerly home to the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, one of the only dry docks on the west coast. The shipyard was built in 1870, purchased by the United States Navy in 1940, and permanently closed in 1994. For years it had been the main economic engine for the community. During the 1940s, many Black people migrating from the south found decent work and decent pay at the shipyard. During wartime, it was used to decontaminate ships that carried components for the first atomic bomb. After World War II, the Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory occupied part of the area, where it decontaminated ships employed in nuclear testing in the Pacific and studied the effects of radiation on laboratory animals and human beings.

Many residents whose families had lived in the community for generations had stories about that shipyard, and it was hard to distinguish legend from fact. The lab conducted tests on both human and animal subjects, and some people believed that those who did not survive were buried on the site. Others remembered vividly when a fire burned underground on the shipyard for nearly thirty days before someone came to do something about it. The stories were retold many times and passed down through generations, so that the details had gotten blurry and urban legends began to weave in with the truth.

What was unmistakably true, however, was that Bayview Hunters Point was a community that was neglected, ignored, and ridiculed. When the navy closed the shipyard, it clipped the community's economic lifeline. The many businesses that supported the shipyard shut down. Older residents told me stories about how the neighborhood thrived before the bottom fell out. Their stories were funny and, considering how neglected the neighborhood currently was, seemed almost absurd—the storyteller would paint a picture of roller-skating rinks and Black-owned banks and doctor's offices and grocery stores. It was hard to imagine when I looked around at what surrounded us.

Bayview Hunters Point didn't have a single full-service grocery store. Instead, its residents shopped at dollar stores with packaged processed food beneath the standards of regular grocery stores, discounted because it was not grocery store quality. Liquor stores and discount stores seemed to hold down the corners of every block. A few family-owned businesses with irregular hours dotted the main street; even when they were open, they looked closed.

But it was a community that, despite it all, had no shortage of heart, determination, and resilience. Even when people lowered their voices and cast their eyes downward when talking about the current state of things, I could sense a community where people looked out for one another, cared about what happened to their neighborhood, and deeply wanted the community to thrive once again. I'd never felt more safe than I did in Bayview. Behind the windows with slate-gray grates covering

them were people watching what was going on. Behind the double-locked front doors were families who loved and laughed, families who took care of one another and their neighbors. The neighborhood had a radical Black newspaper called *The Bay View;* the editors, Willie and Mary Ratcliff, actively recruited community members to write about issues impacting the neighborhood and Black people throughout the world. They circulated the newspaper to people in prisons and jails—to the degree that the warden would allow it. To me, they were one of many signs of fierce life, community spirit, and resistance in the neighborhood.

It was also indicative of the area's core identity: While a wide range of ethnicities lived there, Bayview was fundamentally a Black community.

Even Lennar knew that Bayview Hunters Point was a Black community, and it was intent on figuring out how to use that information for its campaign. This turned into a fascinating sociological study for me—observing the behaviors Lennar adopted in order to fit in as a means of accomplishing its agenda. The company spent considerable capital brokering relationships with Black people. When Lennar presented redevelopment plans at community meetings, it made sure to send Black representatives to present those plans. The community meetings were catered with soul food, with the usual spread of fried chicken, greens, and macaroni and cheese.

Bayview Hunters Point was the first place where I was forced to grapple with the contradictions Black people engage in to survive—whatever survival means for them. It also forced me to grapple with a brutal reality: Not all Black people want the best for Black people. In fact, some will knowingly harm Black people for their own benefit, everyone else be damned.

Patronage and "pay to play" politics had become commonplace in San Francisco. This kind of practice was routine under

the administration of then-mayor Willie Brown, Jr., but patronage politics were commonplace under white mayors too. "Community consultants"—people who were paid by the developer or other corporations to help win favor for proposed projects—were regular fixtures in most public meetings I attended about the redevelopment project. They were familiar faces: Mostly cisgender men, they'd arrive in suits that were ill-tailored, with gold rings and watches. They would enter the hearing, wait for the public comment period, say a few sentences about how Black people had been ignored for too long and we needed this project to bring jobs to the community, and then they would leave. I would watch this theater and get annoyed and angry but also sometimes amused. It was fascinating to me that these people were being paid by the company to deliver rubber-stamp statements about support or opposition to this or that project but would never have been directly hired into the company through regular channels had they tried it. They had a place and they stayed in it.

We started to discover that this sort of patronage politics could work against us but could sometimes work for us. The downside, of course, was when the community consultants would publicly attack and try to delegitimize us. They would frame us as "outsiders who were experimenting on a poor Black community that deserved so much more than it was getting." We would be accused of wanting to take food out of mouths and money out of pockets. Their argument was bluntly material: First they would say that development brings jobs to communities that need them. Next they would say that development was happening all over the city, so why should the Black community miss out on an opportunity to have the same advantages as other neighborhoods in San Francisco? And finally they would say that it was time to clean up the community and make a path for luxury development. "Public housing was

never meant to be permanent housing," they would say when addressing concerns about public housing units being lost in the transition to mixed-income housing. "It's time for some of those families to stand on their own two feet."

However, when patronage politics worked in our favor, we had to be savvy about it. It was best when we found the places where our short-term interests aligned with Black people who worked within the city's bureaucracies. There were always people in the city government who wanted to do the right thing and saw cooperation with us as a way of creating positive change from the inside. The cooperation they offered was always quiet but could be consistent. These were allies inside departments like the Redevelopment Agency who would give us information that had been otherwise difficult to obtain. Someone would let it slip that if you read the project's fine print, you'd notice that there would be community oversight for only ten years, or that despite its promises, the Redevelopment Agency had neglected to ban the use of eminent domain on household properties—which meant that there was a danger of the city being able to take a home in order to build something else. There were times when the developer had intentions so nefarious that even the consultants and Black administrators and bureaucrats could not help but object. They did, after all, still have to live in the community.

At the same time, the more we talked with residents, the more we started to see that the support for redevelopment wasn't entirely driven by corporate interests. Sometimes, older residents—the ones who'd seen the decline of the community most clearly—were the largest champions of redevelopment and associated initiatives. They wanted to see the community restored to its old grandeur, so they were proponents of more police in the neighborhood and turning housing projects into mixed-income housing that would attract wealthier residents.

Some would decry the ways in which they felt the "younger generation" had run down the community, as if it were purely a matter of choice and not deliberate economic starvation that had stopped others from reaching the low rung of the middle class they'd managed to attain. And even though some of the residents had been displaced by an earlier redevelopment project in the city's other Black neighborhood, the Fillmore District, they saw that project as more clearly driven by racism and corporate greed, not by residents who wanted to see their community change for the better.

Redevelopment was never a simple question when it came to Black communities in San Francisco. It was true that residents locked out of the economy by racism—in a community abandoned by the navy, left with little more than toxic hot spots and derelict buildings—deserved improvements that could provide people with what they needed to live good lives. But it was also true that the city had long planned to remake the neighborhood for wealthier and whiter residents who were renewing their interest in the City by the Bay, and they planned to do it with or without the consent of the people who lived there.

The story of Bayview Hunters Point isn't markedly different from the stories of many Black communities across the nation. There are those who remember when Black families had a shot at creating a better life for themselves, when there was some relative safety in segregation, back when people *knew* one another and depended on one another to survive. Often, the turning point in this narrative—the point where things "went wrong"— is when drugs and guns flooded the community, leading to violence and flight, abandonment and disinvestment. So, when it came to gentrification, there were people who saw it as a positive, who felt strongly that any change was a good change in a community where it seemed like there were no other options and no other avenues. If an important component

of organizing is knowing what moves people to take action and what keeps them from getting active, in Bayview—and other Black communities—we saw how important it was to understand the specific historical dynamics that shaped the community's understanding of how the world functions and why.

Black communities are not a monolith. Not only do we defy stereotypes of who we are and who we can be, but we also defy stereotypes of what we believe politically. In progressive circles, many people—mostly not Black—are surprised to learn that Black people can be quite conservative when it comes to social policy, perhaps falsely believing that all Black people inherently prioritize freedom and equality for everyone. This misperception is actually quite dangerous. While it may be safe to say that Black communities want to see a better world for themselves and their families, it isn't accurate to assume that Black people believe that *all* Black people will make it there or deserve to. While some of us deeply understand the ways in which systems operate to determine our life chances, others believe deeply in a narrative that says we are responsible for our own suffering—because of the choices we make or the opportunities we fail to seize. Some Black people think we are our own worst enemy.

Shortly after we qualified for the ballot measure, our coalition started hearing whispers about a competing measure orchestrated by a coalition of community organizations: a group named Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (formed from a defunct chapter of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), the San Francisco Labor Council (comprising labor organizations throughout the city), and the San Francisco Organizing Project (an affiliate of the PICO network, a coalition of faith-based organizations). Their measure, later named Proposition G, would have undercut Proposition F,

mandating that the city move forward with transferring the land at the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard to the master developer, the Lennar Corporation; rebuilding the Alice Griffith Housing Development, a public housing development located near the stadium in the community that was badly in need of repair; and authorizing a new stadium to be built to help keep the 49ers in San Francisco. Their measure made no provisions for ensuring that the housing being built would be affordable, though press releases from the developer tried to assure residents that 20 percent of the housing built in the project would be made affordable.

The developer moved to sign a "community benefits agreement" with the newly formed coalition, which called itself the Committee for Jobs and Housing in Bayview. The aim was to ensure that the project would proceed as is, under the guise of having support from the community for the plan. That community benefits agreement was then used to assuage concerns about the progress of the cleanup efforts at the shipyard, distract from murky commitments for local hiring, and get people to overlook the fact that handing the land over to the developer for the price of one dollar was a major giveaway that shouldn't have passed muster.

Despite the fact that all of the organizations comprising the committee were led by white people with little to no relationship to the community itself, the developer touted the agreement as a sign of massive community support. In one op-ed in the local paper, the then–vice chair of the San Francisco Labor Council, a white woman, wrote in support of the project, citing her opinion that Black people were leaving San Francisco en masse because we were killing one another—not anything to do with displacement driven by corporate development, making housing unaffordable, and unequally distributing resources. The agreement was successful in undercutting the campaign to win

affordable housing for the community, particularly in the areas most vulnerable to displacement due to additional market-rate development. When Election Day came, our proposition failed.

Black people were not a robust component of San Francisco's progressive community. I was often one of a very few in coalitions and meetings. And while I thought that perhaps this was just a phenomenon in San Francisco, I would later learn that Black people are not a huge force—at least in numbers—in any progressive political community. This is a problem. Black communities are on the losing end of the spectrum when it comes to anything that progressives care about, whether it be affordable housing, affordable and quality education, democracy, maternal health, police violence, incarceration and criminalization, or environmental concerns, to name a few. Without Black people, there is no such thing as "progressive" anything.

Most important, the underrepresentation of Black communities in progressive coalitions can lead to at least two tragic outcomes. One, the concerns of Black communities never quite make it into their agendas to change the country and change the world. If progressive movements are largely envisioned and created in the image of white people and the concerns of white communities, Black communities will continue to suffer from disparities brought on by rigged rules that are designed to keep Black communities away from resources and power. If the agendas we adopt are largely designed to maintain the well-being of white communities and white families, that is what will be achieved.

The other tragic outcome is that without Black communities, a progressive agenda can never be truly achieved. Any progressive agenda that does not include the well-being and dignity of Black communities as a fundamental pillar is not really progressive at all. It will, at best, win big changes for some while still excluding others.

What can Black communities do under these circumstances? There's no single answer.

Some are willing to take what we can get and try to make the best out of what should be better. The community benefits agreement, for instance, was negotiated in exchange for an agreement not to contest the project for the duration of the project—one hundred years. Meanwhile, many of the benefits promised to Bayview Hunters Point have still not come to fruition, more than a decade later. But the people who supported it—including some of the Black people in the community—decided to just take what they could.

For others, the answer is to turn their backs on progressive movements. This is a dangerous place for Black communities to occupy and may further isolate us from accessing and building political power.

Twelve years after the battle of Proposition F and Proposition G, the same questions remain. Recently, it was discovered that contractors falsified records of cleanup activities on the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, for instance—but many of those who negotiated that community benefits agreement have moved on, leaving residents with little recourse to hold anyone accountable for the deal and its aftermath. They certainly can't get help from the developer, which, despite being given a sweetheart deal, has little to no accountability to the community whose neighborhood was sold out from underneath them.

Bayview Hunters Point was a community that no progressives in San Francisco would touch. It was once said that it was impossible to organize there. Today, Bayview is officially a part of the story of gentrification in San Francisco and thus regarded

as a community worth fighting for—even if the leverage points to best fight the process have long since passed.

For weeks after losing that campaign, I thought long and hard about what we could have done differently. That campaign stretched our organization and our coalition in ways that were difficult but important. My organization, POWER, had always appealed to me because of its unapologetically radical politics and vision—and yet it wasn't our radical politics that could have won the campaign, given the deep-seated beliefs community members had about how change happened and what kind of change was possible. Winning simply required us to get as many people to our side as possible—a simple math equation in which whoever had the most votes won. I wished we'd gotten to work earlier to build as broad a coalition as possible in order to win. If we'd had more partnerships to draw from, we might have been able to access more of the resources we needed to win. As it was, we came close, and we did it through broadening our coalition and building support for our proposal among people who couldn't have been more different. The way we made inroads in our fight to stop the gentrification of Bayview wasn't just by building with organizations and groups that already agreed with us: It was by building with the Black woman who worked for the city, who would never come to a meeting but perhaps had relatives or friends who lived in the community. It was that Black woman who would slip us information about when meetings previously unannounced would occur, or who would inform us discreetly about the next move the developer planned to make. We came close to winning by agreeing to build with organizations that we did not consider to be radical and some that we didn't even consider to be progressive. We brought the campaign to those we did not believe would join us, and we allowed ourselves to be surprised—and we often were.

Building broad support did not mean we had to water down

our politics. It didn't mean we had to be less radical. It meant that being radical and having radical politics were not a litmus test for whether or not one could join our movement. It meant that we created within our campaign an opportunity for more people to be part of the fight to save what was left of Black San Francisco and to see that fight as their own.

Organizing in Bayview forever shifted my orientation toward politics. It's where I came to understand that winning is about more than being right—it is also about how you invite others to be a part of change they may not have even realized they needed.

CHAPTER FIVE

UNITE TO FIGHT

I LEARNED SO MUCH ABOUT ORGANIZING BLACK COMMUNITIES through my work in Bayview, but the Bay Area has also—for generations—been a crucible for radical multiracial political movements. That was the world I'd joined in the early 2000s, before I started organizing in Bayview Hunters Point.

The truth is we depend on one another to survive. In communities across America, people from different races, backgrounds, experiences, and ethnicities live together. We ride the bus together, work in the same industries, send our kids to the same schools, and, for the most part, desire the same things: We want to make sure that the people we care about have food in their stomachs and roofs over their heads. We want a better set of choices and chances than we had and a secure and bright future for those who come after us.

And yet, we don't all have what we need to live well. Interdependence sounds so beautiful, but often that dependence is predatory, rather than cooperative. For instance: If there were no

Black people, there would be no white people. Whiteness depends on Blackness to survive—whiteness as a valued identity would not exist if there wasn't Blackness, an identity that has been associated with violence, crime, and dysfunction.

During the Occupy movement in 2011–12, a helpful (though deceptively simple) equation emerged that told the tale of the economy in plain terms: There was the 99 percent, and then there was the 1 percent. The 99 percent are those of us living under a roof we don't own and can't own because we can't afford it; those of us trying to care for our aging parents at the same time we are caring for our own children and struggling to figure out how to afford it; those of us living in communities where there aren't any grocery stores but there are liquor stores on every corner. The 1 percent are those who own the companies that charge up to $5.70 for a fifteen-minute phone call from prison; those who buy housing for cheap in poor communities, renovate it or turn it into condominiums that the same people in that community could never afford. The 1 percent are the people who run insurance companies that gouge families for the cost of care.

Within the symbolic 99 percent we find most people of color, women, immigrants, people with disabilities, and some white men. And in the 1 percent, with few exceptions, you will find white men.

But this reality doesn't stop people in the 99 percent from believing that they will one day become a part of the 1 percent if they just work hard enough. And they blame other groups within the 99 percent for being the obstacle between them and a Bentley. Black folks and poor white people will say that immigrants are taking our jobs and that's the reason unemployment is so high in our communities. People of all races will say that Black people are the main abusers of social programs, turning temporary programs into lifelong dependency. Immigrants will

say that Black people are lazy and don't want to work and that is the reason we are unable to achieve the American Dream.

As organizers, our goal was to get those in the 99 percent to put the blame where it actually belonged—with the people and institutions that profited from our misery. And so, "unite to fight" is a call to bring those of us stratified and segregated by race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and body, country of origin, and the like together to fight back against truly oppressive power and to resist attempts to drive wedges between us. More than a slogan, "the 99 percent" asserts that we are more similar than we are different and that unity among people affected by a predatory economy and a faulty democracy will help us to build an unstoppable social movement.

Many of the organizations that I helped to build between 2003 and today upheld the principle of "unite to fight" before "the 99 percent" was a popular phrase. This orientation is not just important for the potential of a new America; it is important for the potential of a globally interdependent world.

There are very practical reasons why multiracial movements are vital to building the world we deserve. Segregation by race and class has been used throughout history to maintain power relationships. Segregation, whether through redlining or denying citizenship, helps to create an other, which helps in turn to justify why some people have and other people don't. It reinforces the narratives that make unequal power relationships normal.

This is why it's so important—and difficult—to engage authentically in the complicated conversation about multiracial organizing as a theory of social change. When I say "theory of social change," I mean an organizing idea that helps us answer these simple questions: What sparks change? How do we inspire our communities to fight, and how do we keep our communities fighting for the long haul? What gets in the way of fighting back, and how do we address those challenges?

Without having a nuanced, authentic, and courageous conversation about multiracial organizing as a theory of change, we will leave our most critical work undone.

I have always worked in multiracial organizations. The first base-building organization I joined had a membership comprising Black Americans (Black people born in the United States), Chicanos (Mexican Americans), immigrant Latinos (born outside the United States), working-class white people, and a few Asian folks, some of whom were born in this country, some of whom were not. When I began working at POWER in 2005, our organization had an explicit strategy that involved building a base of African Americans and immigrant Latinos. In fact, our model of multiracial organizing was one that other organizations looked to for inspiration on how to build multiracial organizations. The National Domestic Workers Alliance, where I currently work, is a multiracial organization comprising Pacific Islanders, Black immigrants, U.S.-born Black people, South Asians and others from the Asian diaspora, immigrant Latinos, Chicanas, and working-class white people. My organizing practice and my life have been enriched by having built strong relationships with people of all races and ethnicities. I've had the opportunity to interrupt stereotypes and prejudices that I didn't even know I held about other people of color, and interrupting those prejudices helps me see us all as a part of the same effort.

Capitalism and racism have mostly forced people to live in segregated spaces. If I stayed in my neighborhood for a full day, I could go the entire time without seeing a white person. Similarly, in other neighborhoods, I could go a whole day without seeing a Black person or another person of color. This isn't by accident—restrictive covenants, redlining, gentrification, and other social and economic processes shape neighborhoods in such a way that they are segregated by class and race. Sometimes the racial makeup of a segregated neighborhood changes: It re-

mains limited to communities of color, but the composition of that ethnic mix can shift. In my neighborhood in Oakland, there are families who are Chinese, Vietnamese and Laotian, Cambodian, African American, Eritrean, Chicano, and both longtime and recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America, among others.

There's a lot of beauty in this kind of diversity within Oakland neighborhoods. In many instances, families of different races have lived together in the same community for decades; they know one another's families and look out for one another. I'm lucky to have lived on the same block for nearly fifteen years, with families who have been there twice as long.

There are also challenges. People who live in the same neighborhood don't always get along just because they live in the same place. Anti-Black racism is a common experience in these neighborhoods, and it's not limited to Oakland. The Los Angeles uprisings in the 1990s revealed for outsiders the tensions that simmer among people of color and immigrant communities living in segregated neighborhoods.

Stereotypes and prejudices fly around from all sides as people try to make meaning out of their conditions and seeming powerlessness. When I was organizing in San Francisco, I would hear these accusations exchanged between people with no organized or systemic power to change their own conditions: "Damn Mexicans," Black people would mutter under their breath. "¡Pinches negros!" Latinos would exclaim.

These conversations rarely happened in the community meetings of the organizations I worked with. That didn't mean microaggressions wouldn't appear when we were together, but it did mean that people generally knew what was and what was not acceptable in that sort of space, like being on your best behavior at your grandmother's house and keeping those damn elbows off the table.

Typically, the most honest conversations would happen in spaces that felt safest—their homes. I would sometimes have the realest conversations when I was door knocking. "Look, I don't have nothing against nobody, but here's what I don't understand about these Mexicans," a conversation with a Black neighbor might begin. "How can so many of them live in one house? They got eighteen cars on one block—half of 'em don't work. They're loud, and the men be getting drunk and fighting on the weekends. I wish somebody would just deport they ass so I could finally have some peace and quiet." *Ouch,* I would think. *So much for not having nothing against nobody.* "And the Asians," they would continue, "at least the Asians got their stuff together. They live all up in one house, but that's because they're saving their money to buy another house. The Asians stick to their own. They help each other come up, unlike our people."

A co-worker and friend would describe similar conversations with Latina domestic workers she was organizing. "I don't understand why Black people are so lazy," they would say. "I just see these men standing around all day doing nothing. Hanging out. They don't even seem like they want to work. There was a movement in this country to get justice for Blacks," they'd proclaim, having experiences with social movements in their home countries. "But for what? What are they *doing* with that freedom they fought for?" I would grimace as she and I would exchange stories.

While these conversations most often occurred in private, sometimes they'd appear in our community meetings. Usually a newer member would say something disparaging of another race or ethnicity, and the room would go quiet. People would shift uncomfortably in their seats, and eyes would immediately be cast toward the floor. Inevitably, an organizer, flustered and trying to think on their feet, would go into a long diatribe that essentially amounted to "We need to be nice to each other."

Other times it would go toward a long and overly complicated explanation about how the system keeps us apart but we need to stick together because #BlackBrownUnity. The person would nod, embarrassed about the obvious slip, and the room would move on.

I've been on both sides of this, to be completely honest. I've been the person who needed to intervene but wasn't effective, and I've been the person who watched it all go down, thinking, *Nothing that you just said in that ten long minutes of talking changed one thing about how that person thinks or feels.* And often, it didn't. I have done countless one-on-ones after incidents like that and always felt like I was being told what I wanted to hear—because, in essence, I was.

My argument here is not that we shouldn't challenge racism, homophobia, patriarchy, ableism, and xenophobia anywhere and anytime they arise, because we absolutely should. My argument is that the way we tend to challenge aggressions that arise between and among oppressed communities is reflective of the same kind of systems we are trying to dismantle. Or, to make it plain, you can't tell people that they don't see what's happening right in front of their eyes. No matter how many times you tell someone that the sky is green, if they look at the sky and they see blue, they may nod and agree with you in the moment, but fundamentally they believe that the sky is blue. They know that when they're around you, they should nod and smile when you say that the sky is green, but when they are back in their environment, they will revert to seeing that blue sky.

And can you blame them? What they see in their communities is exactly what I see in mine. The only difference between us, honestly, is that I have a different story that describes why I see what I see and what that means for the possibility of changing our conditions.

I started using a different approach with the tough Black women I was organizing to fight against environmental racism and police violence. Instead of saying, "Shh! Don't say that, it's not nice," or going into some academic or self-righteous diatribe about why we need to stick together, I decided to ask questions and help to place our experiences into context. When someone would make a disparaging remark about how many Latinos lived in one house, instead of saying, "That's not true," I would say, "Yes, I've seen that too. What do you think it's like to live in a house with so many people?" That would inevitably open up room for a conversation about why so many people lived in one house—what was driving so many Latinos to be crammed in? Was that the future they had imagined for themselves when they came to this country, or was something else going on? This would inevitably lead to a conversation about racist immigration policies and why so many people were being pushed out of their homelands and forced to travel to a strange land to try to fend for themselves and their families. Why was immigration policy not uniform across the board—why were Mexicans crossing a desert with nothing but the clothes on their backs but Europeans were arriving on planes with visas in hand? Why did a lack of affordable housing in San Francisco force people to live in cramped quarters?

And the same applied when I talked to our Latino members. Why were Black people standing outside during the workday, not working? It made no sense to respond to the inquiries of our Latino members by saying they didn't see what they were in fact seeing. I saw it too. Why were so many Black people, particularly Black men, unemployed? Why had there been several periods of successful resistance to racism and yet Black people were still living in deplorable conditions?

In 2007, I was still working with POWER. That June, we helped organize a delegation of thirty people for a trip to the United States Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia. Half of our

delegation was Black—some of whom were members of our Bayview Hunters Point Organizing Project—and the other half were immigrant Latina domestic workers. We tacked on a few extra days before the forum to tour Atlanta, and one of our stops was a museum that explored African American history. Inside, the museum takes its attendees through the history of slavery—beginning with the Ivory Coast communities in Africa that would become slave trading posts, then to a replica of a slave ship. As you stand in the hull of the replica, surrounded by wooden bodies packed in like sardines, you hear the sound of waves lapping against the boat, footsteps above your head, and men talking on the deck. Interwoven you hear groans, people speaking in different languages, trying to find anyone they know or who might know what home once looked like, sobs and whimpers. Once through the boat, you arrive in the colonies, where photos and replicas show Black people—men, women, and children—being auctioned off in the town square. The barren slave quarters, the songs of Black resistance inside cotton fields, stories of Black women killing their own children rather than have them born into one of the most horrific systems in history. Emancipation and Reconstruction, President Andrew Jackson and President Abraham Lincoln. Sharecropping and Jim Crow. The Great Depression. Separate and unequal. Segregation and the bus boycotts. Lunch counter sit-ins and violent responses from the Ku Klux Klan and the police. Four little girls murdered in a church in Birmingham, Alabama. Civil rights and Black power. Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition, Rodney King and the Los Angeles uprising.

As I walked through the museum that day, I cried—a lot. I cried at all that Black people have endured and continue to endure. Eyes red and puffy, I cried when I saw our Latina members—most of whom were domestic workers, wearing headsets for interpretation—learning in their native language

the horrors that befell Black people in this country. Museum-goers stared at us, a motley crew of Black people, Latinas, and white people, communicating across language, culture, and experience. I saw our members soften toward one another. Though many had been in the organization together for years, this shared experience was different from being in a meeting planning campaigns or in a political-education session learning about capitalism. I cried for the potential of a world where this could be us every day—learning about one another, placing ourselves in one another's history, and caring for it with compassion, empathy, and commitment to never let ourselves be separated again.

Together, that day in June, we learned a lot about why so many Black people are unemployed, why there had been several periods of successful resistance to racism and yet Black people were still not free. I remember one of our members saying that she now better understood that Black people's fight for freedom, dignity, and a good life was still going on—that it was nowhere near complete. It reminded her of her own experiences in Oaxaca, Mexico, fighting corporations that were poisoning families and supporting corruption in the government. It reminded her of why, even though she had fought, she had to leave her homeland, because it was too dangerous for her to remain there. In that moment she was reminded of the deep humanity in all of us and what happens when our humanity is stripped from us. What she had learned about the United States was that Black people had fought for our rights and our freedom and had won. What she learned in coming to the United States was that the struggle for everyone's freedom was all of ours to fight for, that there was resistance and even joy inside miserable and dire conditions, and that we were a part of an ongoing resistance that we all hoped would bring back the dignity we all deserved.

And, as an organizer, it was my responsibility to keep telling the truth about what was happening in our communities. There

were indeed too many people living in cramped conditions, too many people not working, and too many of us keeping to ourselves and worrying about our own. I would keep asking why I was seeing what I was seeing, and then I would ask myself what I could do to change it.

Asking questions is one of the most important tools we as organizers have at our disposal. Asking questions is how we get to know what's underneath and in between our experiences in communities. Knowing why something is happening can change behavior, in that it develops a practice in a person of doing the same—asking why they see what they see, what's behind what they see, and, most important, if they are motivated not to experience it anymore, what can be done about it.

CHAPTER SIX

TRAYVON, OBAMA, AND THE BIRTH OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

TRAYVON MARTIN WAS KILLED IN SANFORD, FLORIDA, ON FEBruary 26, 2012, just three weeks after his seventeenth birthday. Trayvon was visiting his father and his father's fiancée at her townhouse when he went to a local convenience store to get Skittles and an iced tea for his older brother, Jahvaris. On the way, he called his friend Rachel "Dee Dee" Jeantel. He walked into the store, purchased Skittles and a Snapple iced tea, and then left the store, still on the phone with Jeantel. It had started to rain, so Trayvon ducked under an awning—and that's when he noticed that there was a man watching him. That man was twenty-eight-year-old George Zimmerman. Still on the phone, Trayvon told Jeantel that some "creepy ass cracker" was watching him from a car, talking on a phone. She told Trayvon to run, and so he pulled his hoodie up over his head, ostensibly to stay somewhat dry, and began to run back toward his father's fiancée's house. Jeantel told Trayvon to keep running all the way to