

HOW NYC BECAME A TALE OF TWO CITIES, p5

# THE INDYPENDENT

Issue #191, November 1-30, 2013  
A FREE PAPER FOR FREE PEOPLE

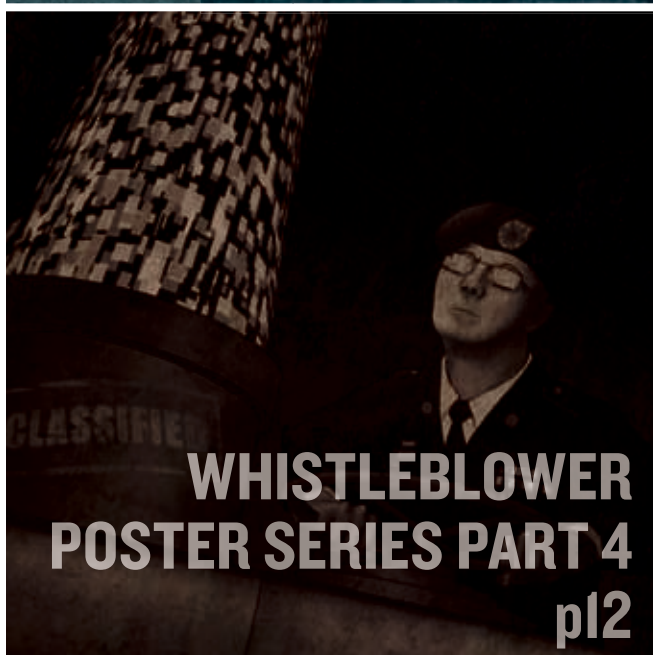


## Market Madness

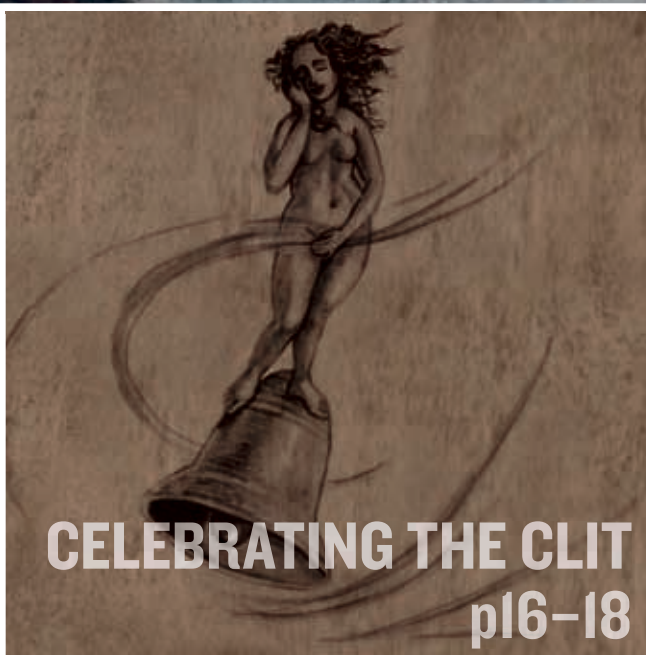
WHAT'S REALLY WRONG WITH OBAMACARE

By Margaret Flowers, p8

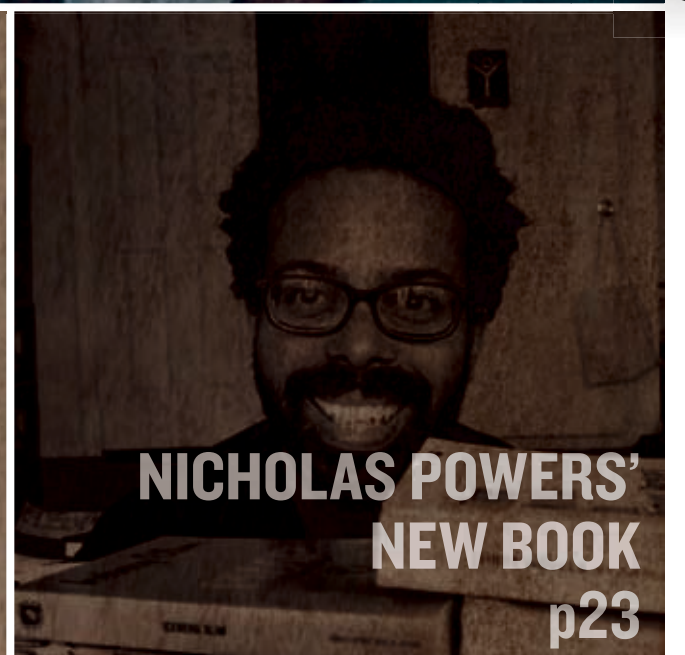
ANDYPUGH.COM



WHISTLEBLOWER  
POSTER SERIES PART 4  
p12



CELEBRATING THE CLIT  
p16-18



NICHOLAS POWERS'  
NEW BOOK  
p23



## the reader's voice

### THE INDYPENDENT, INC.

666 Broadway, Suite 510  
New York, NY 10012  
212-904-1282

www.indypendent.org  
Twitter: @TheIndypendent  
facebook.com/TheIndypendent

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

Ellen Davidson, Anna Gold,  
John Tarleton

### MANAGING EDITOR/COORDINATOR:

Alina Mogilyanskaya

### EDITORS:

Ellen Davidson, Mary Annaise  
Heglar, Elizabeth Henderson,  
Nicholas Powers

### CONTRIBUTING EDITOR:

John Tarleton

### ILLUSTRATION COORDINATOR:

Frank Reynoso

### DESIGNERS:

Steven Arnerich, Anna Gold,  
Mikael Tarkela

### CALENDAR EDITORS:

Ben Ashwell,  
Seamus Creighton,  
Gabriela Kruschewsky

### GENERAL INQUIRIES:

contact@indypendent.org

### SUBMISSIONS AND NEWS TIPS:

submissions@indypendent.org

### SUBSCRIPTIONS AND DONATIONS:

indypendent.org/donate

### ADVERTISING AND PROMOTION:

ads@indypendent.org

### READER COMMENTS:

letters@indypendent.org

### VOLUNTEER:

volunteer@indypendent.org

*The Independent* is a New York-based free newspaper published 13 times a year on Mondays for our print and online audience of more than 100,000 readers. It is produced by a network of volunteers who report, write, edit, draw, design, take photos, distribute, fundraise and provide website management. Since 2000, more than 700 journalists, artists and media activists have participated in this project. Winner of more than 50 New York Community Media Alliance awards, *The Independent* is funded by subscriptions, reader donations, merchandise sales, benefits and advertising. We accept submissions that look at news and culture through a critical lens, exploring how systems of power — economic, political and social — affect the lives of people locally and globally. *The Independent* reserves the right to edit articles for length, content and clarity.

**VOLUNTEER CONTRIBUTORS:** Sam Alcott, Bennett Baumer, Marlena Buczek, Catherine Byun, Hye Jin Chung, Renée Feltz, Seth Fisher, Robert Gonyo, Michael Hirsch, David Hollenbach, Dondi J, Adam Johnson, Marty Kirchner, Timothy Krause, Rob LaQuinta, Gary Martin, David Meadows, Roberto Meneses, Mike Newton, Anna Polonyi, Andy Pugh, Ann Schneider, Jim Secula, Marlena Buczek Smith, Elke Sudin, Gabriella Szpant, Lucy Valkury, Matthew Wasserman, Beth Whitney and Amy Wolf.



Compiled from reader comments at [indypendent.org](http://indypendent.org)

### OWS WAS A GHOST DANCE

Occupy Wall Street (“Radical Reflections,” September *Indypendent*) claimed to have no ideology, so the ideology became the most mouthy and stupid person in the room, then Obama and the unionites and the Democrats. OWS claimed to have no leaders when leaders, usually misleaders or cops, were easy to spot. OWS never occupied anything. Swept away by the cops in 20 minutes is not an occupation. The only lessons to learn from OWS are negative. They got it all wrong. This is an international class war of the rich on the poor. Class war and imperialist war. Denying that and

refusing to build the kind of organization that could upend things demonstrates the waste that was OWS. Good riddance.

—RICH GIBSON

### OCCUPY, LOST AND FOUND

Crystal Zevon’s article “Searching for Occupy” (September *Indypendent*) is powerful on many levels. For me its strength lies in how she relates diverse stories while conveying equal respect and dignity for those telling them. Poor whites, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans (like myself), Asians (and no doubt countless others she met along the way) come alive for us and we perceive their sense of validation by her as she herself seeks to validate Occupy. What a wonderful gift her presence must have been.

—ROSE LAZU

I am inspired by Crystal’s tenacity and the courage of so many people we got snippets of in this piece.

Crystal, make it a book! and I encourage you to get the film you are working on out, too.

—PAKI WEILAND

Thank you Crystal for sharing the stories of the Navajo people. I am happy and grateful for your words and actions to raise awareness about our people’s plight.

—JOANN ARMENTA

### OCCUPY VS. THE TEA PARTY

On the other side, Occupy’s mirror image on the right, the Tea Party, has made huge strides, electing congressmen and senators who are beholden to it and holding them fiercely accountable and dictating the terms of the debate in Washington. Is there a single member of Congress who Occupy can say is theirs? (“Occupy’s Legacy: A Massive Burbling of Possibilities,” September *Indypendent*)

—THURIFER

To Thurifer: It’s easy to get elected to Congress when you are receiving millions in funding. Try doing it on a shoestring and see what happens

—BRONWYN BEISTLE

Comment on the news at [indypendent.org](http://indypendent.org) or send a letter to *The Independent*, 666 Broadway, Suite 510, New York, NY 10012 or email [letters@indypendent.org](mailto:letters@indypendent.org). We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity.

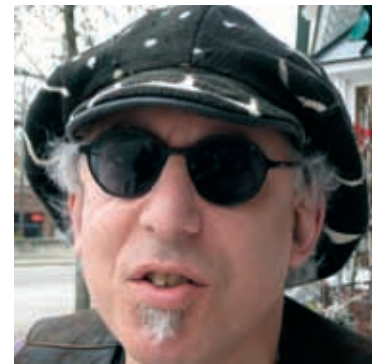
### WEB EXCLUSIVE

OCCUPY SHOULD BE HELD TO A HIGHER STANDARD

“Many of the after-the-fact analyses of Occupy ... have been shortsightedly self-congratulatory,” says Steven Wishnia, who includes

last month’s cover article in *The Independent* (“Occupy’s Legacy: A Massive Burbling of Possibilities”) among the offenders. For starters, Wishnia argues, Occupy should learn from the persistent, on-the-ground organizing that the Civil Rights Movement engaged in to win landmark victories during the 1960s.

To see the rest of Wishnia’s article, go to [indypendent.org/occupy-higher-standard](http://indypendent.org/occupy-higher-standard).



Steven Wishnia

Street Heat, the photograph accompanying Marty Kirchner’s article, “Queens in the Crosshairs,” in the September issue of *The Independent* was taken by Ricardo Gonzalez, not Kirchner. We apologize for the error.



# SUBSCRIBE NOW!

## GET THE INDYPENDENT DELIVERED STRAIGHT TO YOUR MAILBOX — 13 TIMES A YEAR FOR ONLY \$25!

SUBSCRIBE ONLINE AT [INDYPENDENT.ORG](http://INDYPENDENT.ORG) OR USE THIS FORM

NAME

ADDRESS

STATE  ZIP

EMAIL

PHONE

MAKE CHECK OR MONEY ORDER PAYABLE TO “THE INDYPENDENT” AND SEND TO 666 BROADWAY, SUITE 510, NEW YORK, NY 10012



**EARTH-ALUJAH!**: Rev. Billy (left) and the Church of Stop Shopping will perform at Joe's Pub this November and December.

## MON NOV 4

7pm • Free  
**READING: LISTEN, WHITEY! THE SOUNDS OF BLACK POWER, 1965-1975.** While befriending members of the Black Panther Party, author Pat Thomas discovered rare recordings of speeches, interviews and music by noted activists Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, Elaine Brown, and The Lumpen. They form the framework of this definitive retrospective.  
 Revolution Books  
 146 W 26th St  
 212-691-3345 • revolutionbooksnyc.org

## TUES NOV 5

7-9pm • Free  
**SALON: ON POLITICAL IMAGE MAKING.** The first in what will hopefully become a monthly gathering of people who think about political design and image-making with the goal of creating visuals to inspire radical action and support social movements.  
 Interference Archive  
 131 8th St, No. 4, Bklyn  
 interferencearchive.org

## WED NOV 6

6:30pm • Free  
**THEATER: I AM NEW YORK: JUAN RODRIGUEZ.** Artists-in-residence Maija Garcia and Armando Batista of Organic Magnetics will do a theatrical reading of this story, currently a work in progress, which imagines the story of a free man of mixed-race origin from Hispaniola who, in 1613, became the first "immigrant" of New York City.  
 El Museo del Barrio, Black Box Theater  
 1230 5th Ave  
 212-831-7272 • elmuseo.org

## WED NOV 6

7pm • Free  
**BOOK TALK: BROKERS OF DECEIT: HOW THE U.S. HAS UNDERMINED PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST.** Middle East historian and Columbia professor Rashid Khalidi will discuss his new book, analyzing why peace in the region has been so elusive, how the U.S. has acted as mediator, how peace with justice might be achieved in Israel and Palestine,

and more.  
 Friends Meeting House  
 110 Schermerhorn St, Bklyn  
 718-624-5921 • brooklynpeace.org

## THURS NOV 7

7:30-9:30pm • Sliding scale: \$6/\$10/\$15  
**BOOK PARTY: THEY WERE SOLDIERS: HOW THE WOUNDED RETURN FROM AMERICA'S WARS.** Independent journalist and photographer Ann Jones will discuss the latest book in her trilogy about the impact of war. After embedding with U.S. forces in Afghanistan from 2010 onwards, she reports on the pernicious effects our wars have on our own soldiers.  
 The Brecht Forum  
 388 Atlantic Ave, Bklyn  
 212-242-4201 • brechtforum.org

## FRI NOV 8

6-9pm • \$2 suggested donation  
**SCREENING: LEVIATHAN.** As part of their "Labor Goes to the Movies" series, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) of CUNY will screen this sensory-driven film, which records the sounds and images of a commercial fishing boat off the coast of Massachusetts.  
 PSC CUNY Union Hall  
 61 Broadway, 16th Fl  
 212-354-1252 x 270 • psc-cuny.org

## SAT NOV 9

6-10:30pm • Free  
**PARTY: URBAN STARFEST.** Join the Amateur Astronomer's Association and the Urban Park Rangers for their annual star party, held in Central Park's Sheep Meadow. They'll bring the telescopes, you bring the curiosity. Time's Up! is also organizing a bike ride to the site; for info see timesup.org.  
 Sheep Meadow, Central Park  
 Enter from W 67th St  
 aaa.org

## SAT NOV 9

7pm • Free  
**BOOK LAUNCH: THE GROUND BELOW ZERO.** With readings and revelry, this event will celebrate the publication of longtime

*Independent* writer Nicholas Powers' second book.  
 Two Moon Art House and Cafe  
 315 4th Ave, Bklyn  
 631-559-2852 • twomoonbklyn.com

## TUES NOV 12, 26 & BI-WEEKLY

7pm • Free  
**PRISONER SUPPORT: LETTER-WRITING DINNER.** Join the NYC Anarchist Black Cross in writing letters to political prisoners and prisoners of war. A delicious vegan meal, info about the prisoners and how to write letters to them will be provided.  
 CAGE  
 83A Hester St, upstairs  
 nycabc@riseup.net

## WED NOV 13 & THURS NOV 14

Nov 13 7pm, Nov 14 12pm • Free  
**THEATER: DE NOVO: MÁS ALLÁ DE LAS FRONTERAS (BEYOND BORDERS).** This documentary play by Jeffrey Solomon, crafted entirely from immigration court transcripts, interviews and letters, tells the gripping true story of 14-year-old Edgar Chocoy and his legal struggle to be allowed to stay in the U.S.  
 El Museo del Barrio, El Teatro  
 1230 5th Ave  
 212-831-7272 • elmuseo.org

## THURS NOV 14

7-9pm • Free  
**READING: TWO WISHNIAS AND A SPAGNUOLO: THREE GREAT NYC WRITERS.** Longtime *Independent* writer Steven Wishnia, his similarly talented brother Kenneth and Greenpoint poet Peter Spagnuolo will all read from their recent works.  
 Book Thug Nation  
 100 N 3rd St, Bklyn  
 bookthugnation.com

## SAT NOV 16

8pm • \$18  
**MUSIC: PROFESSOR LOUIE AND THE LEWIS FAMILY.** Professor Louie and Fast Eddie, two of PVC's most beloved performers, have brought together a few family members for a very special evening of music and

poetry. The space was full the last time they played and it's anticipated that this time it'll go from full to fuller.  
 Peoples' Voice Cafe  
 40 E 35th St  
 212-787-3903 • peoplesvoicecafe.org

## FRI NOV 22

6pm • \$20, one drink min.  
**EVENT: JFK/NYC/OMG.** On the 50th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Three Rooms Press will present an examination of conspiracies. Speakers include musician-philosopher Grant Hart, poet-novelist-publisher Charles Plymell, musician-writer-conspiracy therapist Exene Cervenka, Allen Ginsberg archivist Peter Hale, writer and Punk magazine co-founder Legs McNeil, and actor-writer Peter Carlaftes (channeling the spirit of Lenny Bruce).  
 Cornelia Street Cafe  
 29 Cornelia St  
 threeroomspress.com

## FRI NOV 22-SUN NOV 24

7pm • \$8 student/\$10 general/\$35 weekend pass  
**CINEMA: IMPUGNING IMPUNITY: A HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTARY FILM SERIES.** Hosted by the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, this weekend-long film series will feature eight powerful films from across the globe that focus on contemporary modes of fascism and serve to highlight and support human rights activism.  
 Pace University, Multipurpose Room  
 3 Spruce St  
 212-674-5398 • alba-valb.org

## SUN NOV 24 & DEC 1, 8, 15, 22

2:30pm • \$15  
**PERFORMANCE: REVEREND BILLY & THE STOP SHOPPING CHOIR.** Join the Reverend and his 35-person gospel choir of merry anti-capitalists for five Sundays at Joe's Pub, where they'll stage a satirical performance you'll likely never forget.  
 Joe's Pub  
 425 Lafayette St  
 212.539.8778 • revbilly.com



**SEEKING A LIVING WAGE:** Striking Wal-Mart workers and their supporters will make their voices heard again this year on Black Friday, Nov. 29. (Above) Supporters in Lynn, Massachusetts join the 2012 Black Friday protests.

## FRI NOV 29

All Day • Free  
**PROTEST: WAL-MART BLACK FRIDAY.** Wal-Mart workers and their supporters will mark Black Friday, the busiest shopping day of the year, with strikes and protests outside hundreds of stores across the country, in-

cluding some in the New York City area. They are demanding higher wages and better working conditions. Follow [forrespect.org](http://forrespect.org) and [makingchangeatwalmart.org](http://makingchangeatwalmart.org) for more information about where actions will take place as the big day draws closer.

## SAT NOV 30

7pm • \$15  
**THEATER: GROWING UP DADDY.** Written and performed by spoken-word artist Kraal "Kayo" Charles, this semi-autobiographical one-man play explores what happens when a rising artist-entrepreneur is suddenly faced with impending fatherhood. Employing poetry and hip-hop, Kayo brings out the complexities of simultaneously embracing and rejecting this all-too-important role.  
 Nuyorican Poets Cafe  
 236 E 3rd St  
 212-780-9386 • nuyorican.org

## THURS-SUN THROUGH DEC 15 (EXCEPT NOV 28-29)

12-6pm • Free  
**EXHIBIT: "COME TOGETHER: SURVIVING SANDY, YEAR 1."** This mammoth exhibition will feature the work of more than 200 artists inspired by and referring to the storm.  
 Industry City  
 220 36th St, Bklyn  
 718-788-1776 • cometogethersandy.com

## THROUGH FEB 16

Th, Sat, Sun 11am-6pm; F 11am-8pm • Free  
**EXHIBIT: "ORCHARD BEACH: THE BRONX RIVIERA."** Photographer Wayne Lawrence's portraits of New Yorkers at the Bronx's Orchard Beach are exquisite. Enough said.  
 Bronx Museum of Arts  
 1040 Grand Concourse  
 718-681-6000 • bronxmuseum.org

## THROUGH APR 4

M, Th, F, Sat 10am-6pm; Tu, W 10-8pm; Sun 10am-5pm • Free  
**EXHIBIT: "WHY WE FIGHT: REMEMBERING AIDS ACTIVISM."** Acknowledging the crucial work of all AIDS activists, "Why We Fight" focuses on the contributions of those

whose work was undertaken in NYC, including pivotal groups such as ACT UP, TAG and others.  
 Stephen A. Schwarzman Building  
 476 5th Ave  
 917-275-6975 • nypl.org

A Tale of Two Cities Needs a Third Party

# VOTE TONY GRONOWICZ

GREEN PARTY CANDIDATE for MAYOR

Author of *Race and Class Politics in New York City Before the Civil War*, Borough of Manhattan Community College professor, faculty adviser to its Student Government, and union activist with the Professional Staff Congress/CUNY. Tony believes we all have a right to a free education, free health care, affordable housing and a job with a living wage, possible only within a sustainable environment free from fossil fuel use.

**VOTE "GREEN" TOP LINE OF OFFICIAL BALLOT, 6TH FROM THE LEFT, ON NOVEMBER 5**



[votegronowicz.info](http://votegronowicz.info)



—PAID ADVERTISEMENT—

# Rebranding NYC

## HOW THE 1% CREATED A TALE OF TWO CITIES

INTERVIEW BY JOHN TARLETON

**B**ill de Blasio shot to the front of the mayoral race this summer when he pointed to an obvious truth: New York City has become a playground for a privileged minority while most city residents live paycheck to paycheck struggling to make ends meet. To help make sense of the origins of New York's vast inequalities and what the prospects are for changing them, I spoke with Miriam Greenberg, author of *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World* (Routledge, 2008). Shedding light on the intersection of popular culture and political economy, *Branding New York* was published to rave reviews five years ago. During this campaign season, Greenberg's work has seemed timelier than ever.

**JOHN TARLETON:** During this year's mayoral campaign, there's been a lot of talk about New York's "Tale of Two Cities." How did the decisions taken in response to the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s help to shape the city we see today?

**MIRIAM GREENBERG:** There was a shift that was experienced throughout the Western world at that time toward a post-industrial economy that saw a shedding of good, well-paid union jobs. These trends didn't cause the fiscal crisis but they did exacerbate conditions on the ground.

In terms of policy, there was a shift — often termed "neoliberal" — that entailed the imposition of austerity and a cutback in public spending in certain areas — especially for redistributive purposes on things such as housing, social services, health, public assistance as well as education — alongside increased spending by the government on efforts to attract and retain businesses as well as more affluent residents and tourists. Cuts to police, firefighters, sanitation and parks were less severe, and were supplemented by public-private partnerships, particularly in wealthier parts of the city.

New York was not unique in making this shift. But, its turn to neoliberalism was certainly seen as a model. Previously, it was a kind of poster child for the nation's urban crisis in the 1970s, and the fact that it came back from the brink with a much more conservative approach led it to be famously embraced by Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s as a model for how the nation should go in this new era.

That shift away from New Deal civic liberalism to conservative free-market policies, combined with the broader economic shift, exacerbated inequality and laid the groundwork for the current "Tale of Two Cities" that de Blasio is talking about.

**JT:** What has been the value of the City's efforts to market and brand itself? How does it shape New York today?

**MG:** The "I Love New York" campaign of the late 1970s tapped into the fear that

what people loved about city life in general and New York in particular was going to be lost. It really resonated with people. There was a desire, a "love," for the grittiness, urbanity and openness that could only be found in cities like New York — a kind of urban utopia. This was epitomized by New York's cultural vitality, represented by Broadway musicals like *A Chorus Line* and *CATS* featured in I Love NY commercials.

In the aftermath of 9/11, there was a similar appeal to New York's cultural vitality, now alongside safety and sustainability. They again hired a new generation of creatives, with backgrounds in the arts, to design these campaigns.

However, there was a contradiction between the utopian desires stirred by these marketing campaigns and the passage of economic policies that had everything to do with incentivizing business and high-end real estate development. So, the question became, for whom is this a sustainable and culturally vibrant city? I think that issue of who the City is being recreated for is felt today as it was in the aftermath of the crisis in the 1970s.

**JT:** Shortly after Bill de Blasio's victory in the Democratic primary, the New York Post ran a guest editorial whose author called on de Blasio's Republican opponent to pander to fears of New York sliding back into the crime and chaos of the 1970s. Why are New York City elites so quick to burnish that imagery when they're facing even the mildest of liberal reformers?

**MG:** (Laughs) I think it's a perspective that continues to haunt elites in the political and business class. Law and order was upheld most strenuously by Giuliani. Bloomberg, while saying he wasn't interested in continuing the adversarial Giuliani legacy, nonetheless appealed to a lot of those same concerns. I think he did it in more subtle ways than Giuliani. The center of the city felt suburban, became a kind of police-free zone. You feel the presence of police when you're in the outer boroughs and upper Manhattan, in poor and working-class, non-white areas.

With de Blasio calling that into question, it challenges not only stop-and-frisk but also the primacy of a Manhattan-centric policing policy and the inequality that underlies that. For elites, this raises the specter of there being less of a division,

spatially and socially, between segments of New York.

**JT:** Speaking of the fear of ungovernability, the NYPD continues to be busy cracking down on everyone from Occupy protesters to aging Vietnam vets recently arrested while protesting at their own memorial to presently engaging in a manhunt for Banksy, the legendary street artist who has been on a creative tear recently.

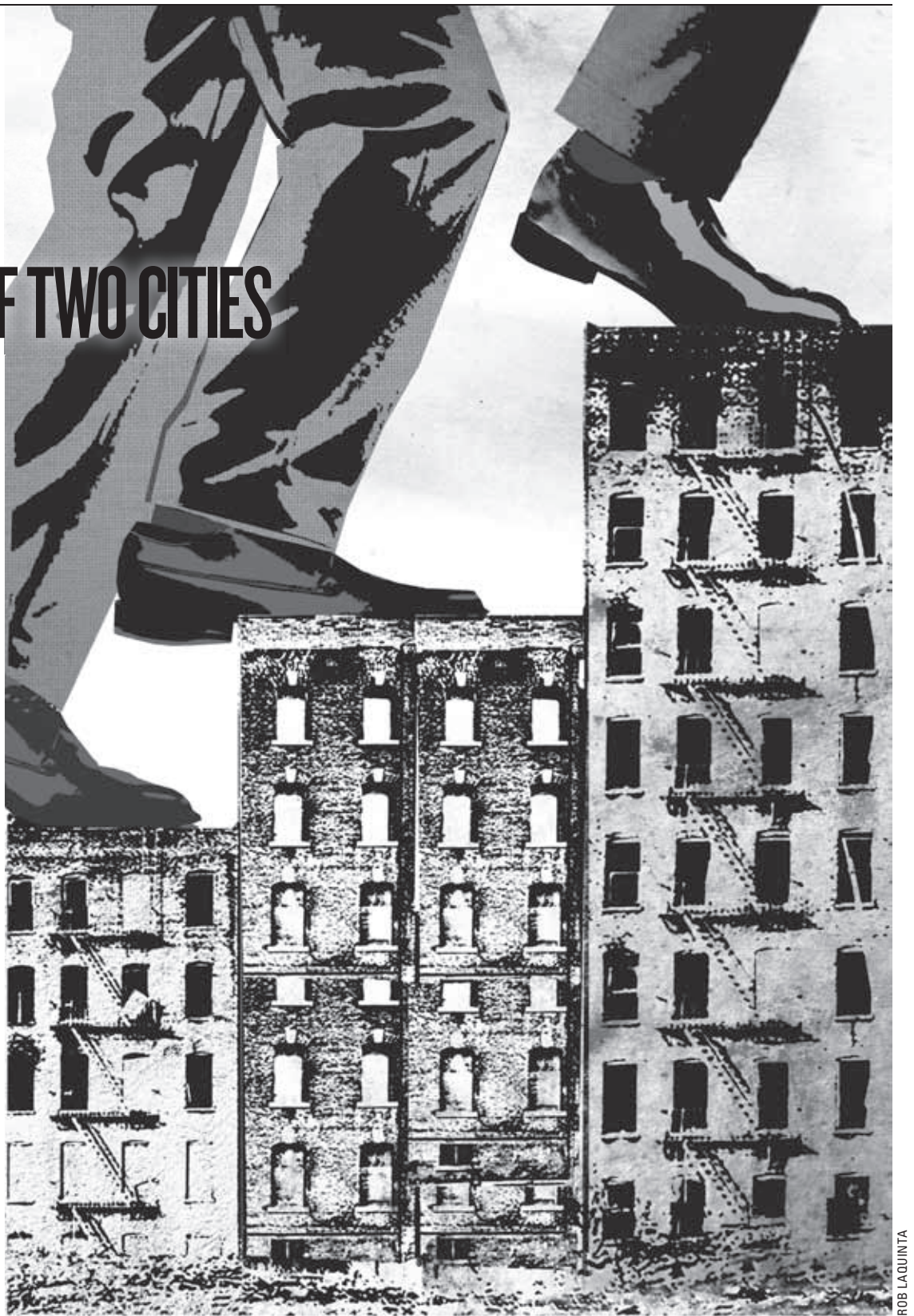
**MG:** What is considered criminal has everything to do with the effort to maintain a certain image of order, control and profitability in a city. In the 1970s graffiti was seen as this overwhelming threat because New York's leaders were striving to restore public perception of the city as creditworthy, business-friendly and as a tourist destination once again. It was feared that graffiti would confirm fears that the City was out of control and being run by teenagers — something the graffiti writers themselves played with.

The glorification of graffiti that Banksy is engaging in is stoking these fears, and making a sly joke of them. The challenge posed by Occupy Wall Street is obviously much more profound because it is directly calling for a change in the political and economic structure of the city and more broadly.

**JT:** What will de Blasio be up against if he tries to break with the neoliberal model of development?

**MG:** It's fair to say that this market-oriented approach to city governance, now epitomized by Bloomberg, has become the status quo, the common sense. De Blasio, at least in his rhetoric, is challenging that common sense. He is referencing an era prior to the 1970s as his model. Meanwhile, he is not simply talking about going back in time, but how an approach that is more equitable and democratic would be viable in and relevant for the current era.

When de Blasio goes to Albany to try to change tax law, he is going to meet strong opposition from centrist state Democrats, as well as from Wall Street and real estate interests that are behind powerful civic organizations like the New York City Partnership and the Association for a Better New York. These groups are not only economically powerful, but over the last 40 years they have really strengthened their political networks. These networks are not always activated, depending on the historical situation. But under conditions of duress and crisis they become very engaged. So it will be interesting to see how that relates to his mayoralty.



ROB LAQUINTA

# New Teacher Evaluations Add to Testing Frenzy

By Emily Giles

Most teachers rank building caring relationships with students at the top of the list of must-dos for good teaching. If I could wrap that secret in a test and sell the copyright to companies that produce standardized tests, I'd be rich. But I can't. Building trust and relationships can't be measured or tested. Observed, maybe. And now it will be.

Sixty percent of a teacher's evaluation under "Advance," a new system being implemented this year in the State of New York, will be determined by the school principal's observations using the Danielson rubric. The rubric attempts to make things like building relationships observable and objective using language like "respectful talk" or "body language indicative of warmth and caring."

The Danielson rubric is actually full of good things that are hallmarks of great teaching — but the idea that any teacher can demonstrate expertise in all 22 components in the span of about an hour and a half of teaching, or that such qualities can be objectively measured, is laughable.

Even if she could demonstrate expertise in all 22 components, and was rated Highly Effective by the principal in all of them, she could still be rated Ineffective overall and be terminated after two years of Ineffective ratings.

This is possible because "Advance" exists and operates in the realm of high stakes testing. If a teacher receives an Ineffective on the Measures of Student Learning portion of the evaluation she must be rated Ineffective overall.

Measures of Student Learning (MOSL) are

standardized tests used to assess the amount of growth students have shown. They make up 40 percent of the evaluation, but an Ineffective in this section overrides any other rating from the 60 percent observations portion. Someone might want to check on the test scores of whoever approved that bit of math.

Recently, I spent an entire afternoon of classes giving a reading and writing exam as part of my school's MOSL to my 9th and 10th grade students. The exam consisted of five non-fiction articles followed by an essay prompt.

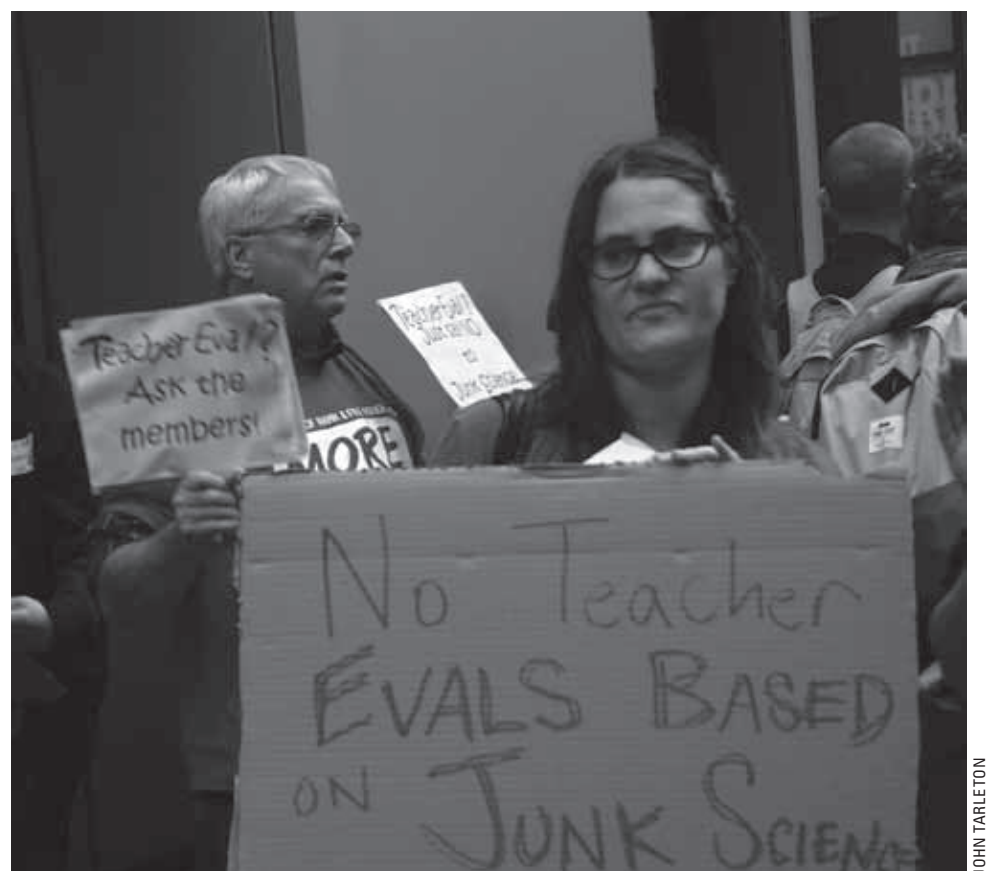
My students all recently arrived to the United States and are learning English. Many of them arrived within the last couple of months — they are beginner English speakers, readers and writers. During the exam, according to DOE rules, they were not allowed translation, bilingual dictionaries or even to have instructions read aloud to them. I spent the period explaining to students that I wasn't allowed to explain. And apologizing frequently.

There are many problems with this. Here are the most worrisome:

**Problem 1:** Assessments that will be used to assess both teachers and students are being implemented before any discussion about how to actually teach what the test is assessing.

**Problem 2:** If students can't understand the test now and still can't adequately understand it in six months, it is not possible for them to show measurable growth. Any results from such a measurement could not possibly reflect the leaps and bounds students will make over

*Continued on page 22*



**SCRAP THE JUNK SCIENCE:** A school teacher protests NYS's new teacher evaluation system.

JOHN TABLETON



DEMOCRACYNOW.ORG

TUNE IN **NYC RADIO**  
WBAI 99.5FM 8am M-F

**NYC TELEVISION**  
CUNY-TV  
6:30pm M-F, 1am Tu-F

**Manhattan MNN**  
8am and 7pm M-F

**Brooklyn BCAT**  
9am M-F

**DISH Network & DirecTV**  
**Free Speech TV**  
8am, noon, 8pm  
and midnight M-F  
8am, noon, 7pm Sat  
8am, noon Sun

**Link TV**  
11am and 6pm M-F

A Daily Independent  
Global News Hour

with Amy Goodman  
and Juan Gonzalez



32 years OF CELEBRATING music  
OF peace AND resistance!

**PEOPLES' VOICE**



Nov 9  
*Such As Us & Tom Ghent*

Nov 16  
*Professor Louie and the Lewis Family*

Nov 23  
*Anne Price & Steve Suffet*

★ SATURDAYS AT 8 P.M. ★

Community Church of New York Unitarian-Universalist  
40 E. 35th St. (Madison/Park)  
New York, NY 10016

doors open 7:30; wheelchair accessible

212-787-3903

www.peoplesvoicecafe.org

Suggested Donation: \$18 or TDF; \$10 PVC members

More if you choose; less if you can't; no one turned away

# Mexican Teachers Flood Capitol to Protest Business-Led School Reforms

By LAURA CARLSEN

MEXICO CITY — The streets of Mexico City seem strangely quiet since the nation's teachers decided October 14 to return to their schools. The tents set up in the downtown blocks are mostly folded up and gone and traffic flows are as can be expected in a city of nearly 10 million.

But it would be a big mistake to consider the chapter closed. Thousands of teachers throughout the country continue to organize, and they are determined to block the changes to the nation's education laws that catalyzed their movement.

After nearly 40 days of a walk-out accompanied by daily marches and demonstrations in the capital city, members of the democratic rank-and-file movement made the decision to return to their local communities. Leaders describe the step as merely a tactical retreat in a long battle.

## CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

Mexican teachers are fighting for their jobs and for public education. The movement, founded over three decades ago as the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE, by its Spanish initials), mobilized to reject changes in the constitution that pin their jobs and salary levels to the results of a standardized test and establish "operating autonomy" for schools to do their own fundraising, among other provisions. The teachers say this will destroy diversity, erode job security and lead to privatization of schools.

The CNTE is the democratic current within the mammoth National Education Workers Union (SNTE), Mexico's most powerful union and the largest labor organization in the Americas. The SNTE is renowned for corruption and politicking. The democratic teachers have sought to challenge the iron rule of pro-government union bosses through grassroots labor organization. The CNTE has thousands of members and has won locals, or "sections," throughout the country.

The most combative, Section 22 of the southern indigenous state of Oaxaca, has spearheaded the recent round of demonstrations against the education bill and enabling laws. The education package, proposed by President Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) soon after taking office and already approved by Congress, affects two Articles of the Constitution. The change to Article 3 makes a Bush-like "No Child Left Behind" test the criteria for teachers' job security and salary levels and establishes an evaluation process. Article 73 gives

schools the capacity to do private sector fundraising to finance basic education.

The changes, characteristic of neoliberal education reforms across the globe, erode teachers' status as professionals with valuable skills and traditional labor rights and protections. They are now categorized as administrative employees of the Secretary of Education and can easily be dismissed from their posts.

Everyone agrees the system has to be reformed. Primary and secondary education is obligatory, yet four out of every 10 adult Mexicans have not finished high school. More than five million Mexicans, mostly women, are illiterate. But Peña Nieto's market-oriented changes don't touch on the obvious gaps in the system.

"The federal government decides, administers and applies policies and budgets and in the end it takes stock and blames its own shortcomings on the teachers," says Isaias Jaime Ignacio, a teacher in the indigenous Mixtec region of Oaxaca. "We try hard to make do with the little they give us — if there's no chalk in a school, we buy it out of our own wages, same with blackboards or when a stu-

**THE GOVERNMENT'S MARKET-ORIENTED EDUCATION REFORMS DON'T TOUCH ON OBVIOUS GAPS IN THE SYSTEM. IN 40 PERCENT OF THE SCHOOLS IN THE COUNTRY, TEACHERS HAVE TO TEACH GRADES 1-3 OR 4-6 IN ONE CLASSROOM. THEIR STUDENTS OFTEN COME TO SCHOOL WITH EMPTY STOMACHS.**

dent doesn't have the money for a birth certificate."

## UNEQUAL FUNDING

Funds for education tend to be directed to the wealthiest parts of the country. This deepens and perpetuates overall inequality and leaves thousands of schools without the minimum necessary for teaching. In 40 percent of the schools in the country teachers have to teach 1st-3rd or 4th-6th graders together in a single classroom. These are also the schools with the worst facilities — dirt floors, tin or cardboard roofs, where children come to with empty stomachs. If changes in education laws fail to provide the basic necessities for learning, clearly no test in the world can improve the quality of the education.

Mexican teachers insist you can't draw an artificial or administrative line between the school and the community when it comes to evaluating the learning environment. Sarvia



**CNTE PRESENTE:** Members of the Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE, by its Spanish initials) march in Mexico City against changes in the nation's educational laws pushed by Mexico's new president Enrique Peña Nieto.

Anali Valverde teaches pre-school in a small community in the indigenous Mixtec region of Oaxaca. In her village, Guerrero Santa Cruz, children have to walk more than two kilometers to go to kindergarten. Many of their parents have been forced to migrate. The children get to school without any breakfast in their stomachs or with a knapsack with a hard tortilla spread with bean paste or a sprinkle of salt.

The new education laws don't address these problems, nor do they acknowledge the challenges posed by the broad range of cultures and peoples that reside in Mexico, where there are more than 50 languages spoken.

"We want to be evaluated, but according to the social and economic context we work in, according to our reality, not standardized procedures," Valverde says. She is one of the thousands of women teachers who make up the majority of the teaching force and the movement. She adds that with the way the

evaluation is set up, it will be used "not to improve education, but to punish and fire teachers." In fact, Secretary of Education Emilio Chuayfett boasts that 60 percent of the workforce will be replaced over the next 12 years.

Peña Nieto's education program opens the door for control by unaccountable elites — specifically, leaders in the private sector who designed the measures through an organization call "Mexicans First," media conglomerates that support the reforms and use the airways to bash the teachers' movement, and representatives of international capitalism such as the World Bank and the Organization of Economically Developed Countries (OECD).

The latter played a major role in designing and pressuring for the changes. Many of the measures copy OECD recommendations for evaluation and orienting education to labor market needs.

Education researcher Hugo Aboites sees it as part of "a clear international confrontation" between "a project that promotes subordination of children and youth to an authoritarian, business-oriented model of society, where people are considered part of capital ... whose main role is to generate wealth for others in the most competitive way possible" and

"a project for integral, liberating and collective education, to make children and youth committed and informed actors capable of working for the transformation of society."

In this vein, the teachers' opposition proposes alternatives that emphasize maintaining their labor rights, holistic evaluation, full funding for public education and offering training and resources to improve teaching.

## POPULAR RESISTANCE

Mexico's constitution enshrines social and cultural rights that have been gradually chipped away at since its birth following the Revolution of 1910. During the past three decades of neoliberal reforms, those rights have been under attack from a succession of presidents, noteworthy among them Peña Nieto's political godfather, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the man who brought Mexico into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994.

The right to free, secular education in Mexico is one of the core revolutionary principles that strike a nerve in the national consciousness, so past administrations have been unable to make sweeping changes without major opposition. After reaching a governing pact among the three major parties, the Peña Nieto administration thinks it has the political clout to pull off its desired overhaul of the education system. It would be the first major step in carrying out an agenda that includes fundamental changes in fiscal and energy policies.

A large grassroots movement against proposed privatization of oil is already brewing. By granting concessions to transnational oil companies for exploration and exploitation of its oil, Mexico loses a main source of income. Most Mexicans view the 1938 nationalization of the oil industry with pride. And while the state-owned company PEMEX is a mess due to government mismanagement, it constitutes a national common good and provides a major part of the national budget.

As the teachers' movement returns to its local bases to organize — with walk-outs in Michoacan, Veracruz and other states — it is also entering a phase of consolidation and alliance-building, in which it joins a rising movement that unites the fight against education reforms and opposition to oil privatization.

With their power base in the streets and in the classroom, teachers are major players as Mexico mobilizes in defense of its rights and resources.

*Laura Carlsen is Director of the Mexico City-based Americas Program at the Center for International Policy.*

# Health Care Market Madness

BY MARGARET FLOWERS

The battle lines have been drawn and the Inside-the-Beltway media circus is underway.

As the Affordable Care Act (or “Obamacare,” as it is popularly known) gets off to a rocky start, Republicans are bellowing that the new health care law should be jettisoned, even though it is modeled on ideas hatched 20 years ago by the conservative Heritage Foundation and originally backed by the likes of Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration insists that once a few computer “glitches” are resolved in the healthcare.gov website by the end of November, everything will turn out swimmingly.

“Don’t worry, these plans will not sell out,” President Obama said in late October. “Everyone who wants insurance in the marketplace will get it.”

Lost amid the noise is the fact that not only could we adopt a simpler, more effective single-payer system that is common to other industrialized nations — more about that below — but also that we are witnessing perhaps the greatest corporate scam ever. Not only did the health insurance corporations write the Affordable Care Act in 2009-2010 to enhance their profits, but now they also have the government and non-profit groups doing the work of marketing their shoddy products.

The foundation of Obamacare, the mandate that uninsured individuals purchase private insurance if they do not qualify for public insurance, goes into effect in 2014. The state health insurance exchanges where people can purchase that private insurance opened on October 1. A new organization called Enroll America was created to organize and train grassroots activists to seek out the uninsured (they even provide maps) and assist them in using the exchanges.

## THE UNINSURED

Can you imagine this scenario with any other industry? Billions of public dollars and tremendous efforts are being spent to create new health insurance markets, advertise them, subsidize their products and actively solicit buyers for them. This is being done with the belief that the solution to our health care crisis is to reduce the number of people who are uninsured. But our health care crisis runs deeper than that. And having health insurance in the United States isn’t the same as having access to necessary care.

Obamacare does not resolve the fatal flaw in our health system — that it is a market-based system rather than a public health-based system, as is the case in all other industrialized nations. Market competition does not improve health outcomes because it consists of health insurance corporations competing for profits by selling policies to those who are the healthiest and denying and restricting payment for care. And regulation of insurers doesn’t work either. Although rules in Obamacare give the appearance of changing insurance

company behavior, insurers are already working around them. Remember, the health insurers wrote the rules.

This illusion that the health insurance corporations are regulated under Obamacare is one of the reasons that progressives have been seduced to accept a market-based health system rather than continuing to push for the system most of them desire, a single-payer Medicare-for-all national health program. Defenses of Obamacare ignore the long history of private insurance domination and are based on the hope that this time things will be different. But Obamacare has not changed the fact that private insurance companies view their plans as products and have no more allegiance to human health than does Big Energy, which will stop at nothing to drill, frack and blow up the planet for profits.

Experience at the state level with similar reforms and a look at current health trends show that Obamacare will leave tens of millions without insurance, will increase the percentage of people who are underinsured, will increase financial barriers to necessary care and will further privatize health care. Cutting out the multitudes of insurers and creating a single publicly-financed universal health care system is the only way to solve our health care crisis.

## TWEAKING THE SYSTEM

During and after the health reform process, the President explained that since most people were happy with their health insurance, we should work with the present health system to improve it. This was the reason given for not enacting a Medicare-for-all system.

From the outset, it is important to realize that 80 percent of the population is generally healthy and that this is the population that private insurers prefer to enroll. People may believe that their coverage is satisfactory, until they have a serious health problem and discover that the out-of-pocket costs and restrictions on their care make necessary care unaffordable.

Is it wise to try to tweak the current system? Will that bring us to universal coverage? The answer is no. About the best that has been achieved by tweaking the present system at the state level is reducing

the number of uninsured people by half. That is what happened in Massachusetts, where legislation similar to Obamacare was passed in 2006.

There are currently 48 million uninsured people in the United States. At its best, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that Obamacare will leave 31 million people without health insurance when it is completely rolled out. And even that estimate may be too low. Experience at the state level showed that none of the plans that were similarly hailed as comprehensive met their coverage goals before they

failed financially. Without effective cost controls, care remains unaffordable.

## SHIFTING THE COSTS

As health care costs have soared in the United States, the trend in health insurance coverage has been to shift more of the costs onto the individual.

This has primarily been done through what are called Consumer-

directed Health Plans (CDHPs), which require co-pays, deductibles and co-insurance.

This means that patients have to pay thousands of dollars in addition to their premiums before and after their insurance kicks in.

These up-front costs are barriers to care. Considering that 76 percent of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck without significant savings, the money simply isn’t there to pay for visits to the doctor, tests or prescriptions. A health survey by the Commonwealth Fund last year found that 80 million people reported not getting care due to cost, 75 million were having difficulty paying medical bills and four million (over two years) went into bankruptcy as a result.

The result of CDHPs is that patients self-ration by avoiding or delaying necessary care. And so many people are currently self-rationing that the rise in health care spending in the United States has slowed over the past five years. Reducing access to necessary care is not the kind of cost-control that should be promoted, but Obamacare does just that.

The health insurance exchanges sell four tiers of coverage, identified by metals. The lowest levels, silver and bronze, will pay for 70 and 60 percent of covered services once deductibles are met. “Covered services” is the key phrase. Health insurers are re-

stricting their provider networks for plans sold on the exchanges to exclude

places where sick people go, large health centers and safety-net hospitals, and to limit the number of doctors. This will force people to go out of the network and bear more or perhaps all of the cost of their care.

The silver and bronze plans have lowered the bar on what is considered coverage. These are levels that will leave people at risk of financial ruin if they have a serious accident or illness. And these are the levels that most people will purchase. Subsidies are available for those who qualify based on the price of a silver plan, and because the subsidies are inadequate, people will migrate to the cheapest plans.

This model means that people will still get the care they can afford rather than the care they need. It means that more people will have insurance but will not be able to afford care. In Massachusetts, eight out of 10 people who see themselves as “sick” report that health care costs are a serious problem for them.

That’s quite a gift to the insurance companies. Millions of new customers will pay premiums, and because of the out-of-pocket costs, may not actually use health services. A cap on out-of-pocket costs was included in Obamacare, but has been delayed for a year because insurers said their computer systems were not ready to manage the caps.



**HAVING HEALTH INSURANCE ISN'T THE SAME AS HAVING ACCESS TO NECESSARY CARE.**



## THOUSANDS OF WAIVERS

The delay on out-of-pocket spending caps is one of the tricks that insurers are using to protect their profits. They have used many others, and we can expect more.

Obamacare was written with the help of large insurance corporation lobbyists and others from health industries. The reform process was led in the Senate Finance Committee by Liz Fowler, a former WellPoint executive and Senate staffer. After Obamacare was signed into law, Fowler was transferred to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to oversee the regulations. Insurance representatives have also played an active role at the state level in forming the exchanges. It is no secret that most state insurance commissioners have close ties to the industry.

The effect that this level of industry influence has had is that thousands of waivers have been issued by HHS to water down provisions in the bill and the industry has participated in writing definitions of terms to their advantage. For example, one area of tension concerned the requirement that insurers spend 80 to 85

percent of what they collect in premiums on health care (called the Medical Loss Ratio, MLR). This requirement simply led to a redefinition of care, and the term was interpreted so broadly as to include insurance brokers. Dr. John Geyman of Physicians for a National Health Program writes, "The insurance lobby won a number of concessions, including counting expenses of quality assurance as medical costs, allowance to deduct many of their taxes from their total premiums before calculating their MLR, and the ability to

## MANY HEALTH INSURERS SIMPLY STOPPED WRITING NEW POLICIES FOR CHILDREN WHEN FACED WITH A POTENTIAL REDUCTION IN PROFIT MARGINS.

appeal for a lower MLR standard for up to three years in states where 'there is a reasonable likelihood that market destabilization could harm consumers.'"

Perhaps one of the most egregious examples of insurance company behavior took place six months after Obamacare was signed. At that point, by law, insurers were no longer allowed to deny new policies to children on the basis of pre-existing conditions. Faced with a potential reduction in profit margins, many health

insurers simply stopped selling new policies for children. In essence, they pulled the product from the shelf. HHS was able to entice the insurers to sell policies again by offering increased premiums and limiting open enrollment periods.

This is one of the ways that insurance corporations cherry pick only the healthiest people. Under Obamacare, some large insurers are avoiding most of the insurance exchanges and are focused instead on offering plans to employers or serving as benefit administrators. Another method

with markets, health insurers will sell their products where they can make the most profit.

We will watch and see what insurers do over the coming years. We can expect them to justify charging higher premiums. In the past, they have reduced premiums temporarily to lure people in or avoid government intervention and then raised them later. We can expect them to push for lower levels of coverage or fewer required services. And we can expect that HHS and state insurance commissioners will be compliant, as they have been.

## TOWARDS GREATER PRIVATIZATION

is restricting networks to avoid facilities that care for the sickest or by reducing the number of providers in a plan. And the third will be to pull out of geographic areas if they prove to be money-losers.

Insurers are not allowed to charge more for people with pre-existing conditions, but they are allowed to charge more for smokers, up to three times more based on age and more in geographic areas where health care costs are high or the population has greater medical needs. As it is

Another myth used to lure progressives to support Obamacare is to say that it is a step in the right direction, meaning towards universal coverage. But Obamacare is actually a step towards greater privatization of our entire health system. It lacks provisions to stop the consolidation of ownership of health facilities by large for-profit entities, something that large insurers are doing more. It cuts funding to

*Continued on page 14*

## influence\_change

Design solutions for our urban future. The New School's academic commitment to social justice blends its leadership role in design at Parsons with its strengths in public policy, international affairs, sustainability, and management.

Undergraduate Urban Programs

**Architecture | Environmental Studies | Global Studies | Urban Design | Urban Studies**

Graduate Urban Programs

**Architecture | Design and Urban Ecologies | Environmental Policy and Sustainability Management | Global Political Economy and Finance | International Affairs | Media Studies | Sustainability Strategies | Theories of Urban Practice | Urban Policy Analysis and Management | Public and Urban Policy**

[www.newschool.edu/urban1](http://www.newschool.edu/urban1)

Urban at  
**THE NEW SCHOOL**

An Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Institution

SO, YOU THINK  
YOU KNOW  
99.5 FM **WBAI**

What you know about this radio station might be like a blind man's view of an elephant.

**It depends on when you listen!**

It's **NEWS!**

Thom Hartmann  
Democracy Now!  
Background Briefing  
Economic Update  
Women's International News  
Gathering Service  
VOMENA (Voices of Middle  
East and North Africa)  
+ SEVERAL MORE!

It's **COMMUNITIES!**

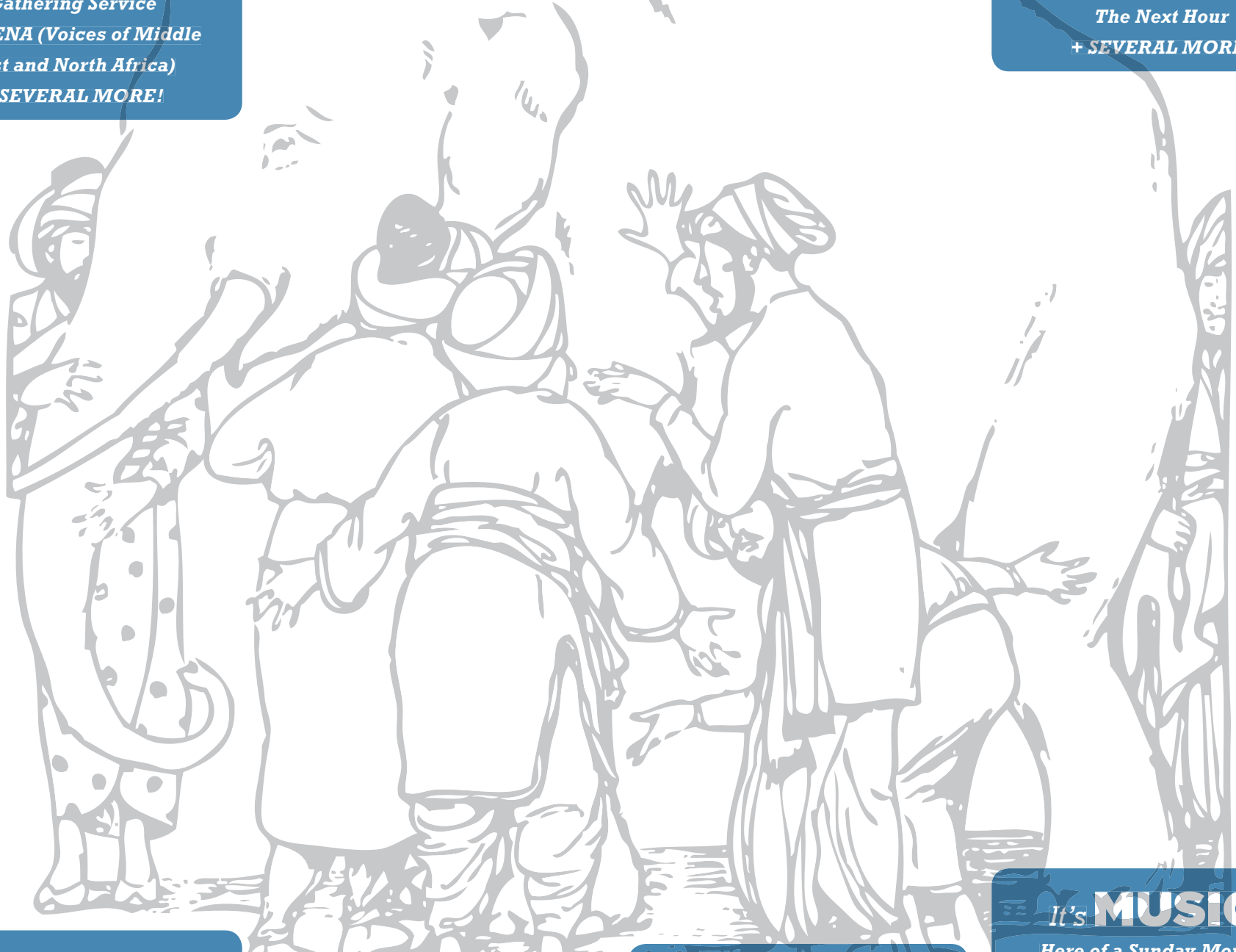
Asia Pacific Forum  
Muslim State of Mind  
First Voices Indigenous Radio  
AfroBeat Radio

It's **GEEKS!**

Explorations (Michio Kaku)  
Off the Hook  
(2600 phone hackers)  
Personal Computer Show

It's **ARTS & LITERATURE!**

Nonfiction (Harry Allen)  
Cat Radio Cafe  
Hour of the Wolf  
(science fiction)  
The Next Hour  
+ SEVERAL MORE!



It's **CAUSES!**

Guns & Butter  
Sojourner Truth  
Against the Grain  
On the Count (Prison Report)

It's **"OTHER"!**

Radio Unnameable (Bob Fass)  
Carrier Wave  
Back of the Book

It's **OLD TIME RADIO!**

Everything Old is New Again  
Golden Age of Radio

It's **MUSIC!**

Here of a Sunday Morning  
Morning Dew  
And You Don't Stop!  
Morning Irsay  
Through the Opera Glass  
+ SEVERAL MORE!

**Go to [WBAI.org](http://WBAI.org) for descriptions and complete listings.**

**WBAI 99.5 FM** in NYC and nearby, streaming online at [wbai.org](http://wbai.org).

**Questions? Ideas? Want to be a volunteer? Please send feedback to [WBAIvolunteer@yahoo.com](mailto:WBAIvolunteer@yahoo.com)!**

# A Poor Millennial's Health Care Dilemma

BY R.K. OWEN

I haven't seen a doctor in years. So far, there hasn't been an urgent need — I'm young, in good health, and have been lucky enough to not get into any accidents. Yet, I also don't have health insurance, principally because I can't afford it. The same goes for many of my peers in their twenties, who are healthy, glaringly poor and more often than not, lacking access to health care.

On October 1, the health care exchanges that are the main feature of the Affordable Care Act went live. An estimated 8.6 million people all over the country went on the federal health website in the first three days, and savvy news commentators — those that found a breath between discussions of the Obamacare-centered government shutdown — pointed to the program's reliance on young people's participation for fiscal success. The Obama administration hopes that 2.8 million uninsured youth, of about 18 million total, will sign up for health coverage through the exchanges. As the logic goes, healthy young people must pay in to make the health insurance offered on the marketplace exchanges affordable by balancing out the costs for their sicker, and often older, counterparts.

And yet, many of us don't find ourselves to be in a position to pay into anything. Those of us who are roughly 30 and under — also known as “millennials” — and more specifically, those who entered the labor force after the beginning of the Great Recession, are faced with a dilemma: try to do what you want, or try to achieve financial stability. Opportunities for accomplishing both are scarce.

My family immigrated to the United States when I was a child, and as a teenager I was studious enough to get accepted into one of the top universities in the country and poor enough to receive a massive no-strings-attached financial aid package. Upon graduating, brand-name degree in hand, I set about trying to begin the career I wanted with the goal of eventually getting paid in the process. The year was 2011, and the moment coincided with the outpouring of hundreds of thousands of beleaguered young people, many of whom were saddled with student loan debt and struggling with limited economic prospects, into the nationwide Occupy uprising.

Close to two years of living at home, several unpaid internships and countless hours spent worrying about my lack of financial security later, I scored a job. It's enjoyable and in my chosen field. It also pays just enough for me to cover rent for a tiny Brooklyn bedroom, groceries and the occasional beer with friends. Making it cover my health care costs would be a stretch, even with the subsidies offered by Obamacare.

Young adults disproportionately lack health insurance: over a quarter of Americans ages

18-34 aren't insured, compared with about 15 percent of the total population. With the rollout of Obamacare, we are now faced with four options:

1. Stay on our parents' insurance, if we're 26 or younger;
2. Apply for Medicaid, if we meet the newly expanded eligibility requirements of earning less than \$15,856 a year for a single person;
3. Try to find our way through the maze of plans available on the newly formed health care marketplaces;
4. Do nothing and pay the resulting tax penalty.

Those of my peers in their mid-twenties who can are opting to stay on their parents' insurance. I personally don't have that option — with both parents citing that adding me to their plans would cost hundreds of dollars more every month, and provide low-quality coverage at that — so in the coming weeks, I'll be applying for Medicaid. While the coverage it offers is limited, it does pay for costly expenses like visits to the emergency room.

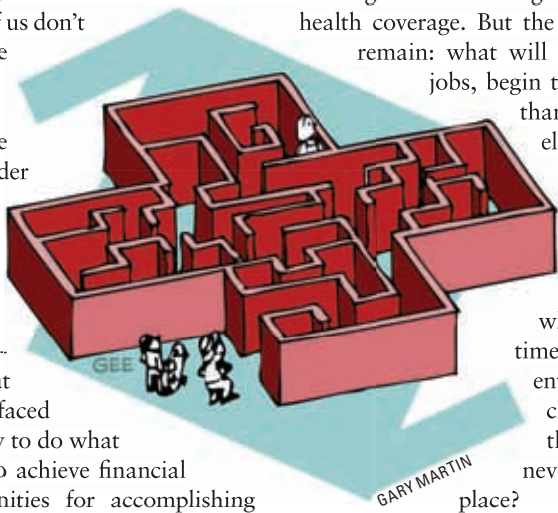
It feels like a golden stroke of luck that my current job pays just little enough for me to be eligible for the government-sponsored health coverage. But the financial dilemmas remain: what will happen if I change jobs, begin to earn a little more than I do now, lose my eligibility and have to buy coverage on the exchanges? Will I be able to afford it? What about those of my peers whose window of time to stay on their parents' plans is quickly closing? What about those for whom it never existed in the first place?

With Obamacare's government subsidies, a single New Yorker earning \$16,000 a year — just over the law's Medicaid threshold — would pay \$45 in monthly premiums for a “silver” insurance plan. Someone earning \$20,000 would pay \$85, and someone earning \$30,000 would pay \$209.

For many of us who are just trying to survive, scraping together even \$45 a month can mean having to go with less — less material basics, less movement, maybe even less food. Perhaps I would take on the added expense, but if I were to actually need health care, I would face hefty co-pays and deductibles, along with the prospect of insurance company officials trying to deny me services at every turn. If something serious happened to me, I would be out many thousands of dollars I simply don't have.

So, no thanks. Young people like myself, the so-called “invincibles,” certainly see the value in having health coverage. But it's much harder to see the value in tossing our meager earnings to private insurance companies, which make away with billions of dollars while so often denying care to those they're supposed to serve.

R.K. Owen is a pseudonym.



# RIGHT WRONGS

**You have the passion...we have the tools.**

Gain the skills to fight social injustice from the nation's premier public interest law school.

CUNY SCHOOL OF LAW

*Law in the Service of Human Needs*



[law.cuny.edu/prospective](http://law.cuny.edu/prospective)



**DATE OF BIRTH**

December 17, 1987

**HOMETOWN**

Crescent, Oklahoma

**WHAT SHE LEAKED**

Private Manning, a U.S. Army intelligence analyst, leaked more than 700,000 classified documents to the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks. Many of these documents were in turn co-published by *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Der Spiegel*. Leaks by Manning include the “Collateral Murder” video that shows troops in a U.S. gunship killing innocent Iraqi civilians and two Reuters journalists, the Iraq War Logs, the Afghan War Diary and a quarter-million State Department cables that provide a glimpse into the machinations of U.S. diplomats.

**IMPACT**

Manning’s leaks about the corruption and abuses of U.S.-backed dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen are credited by many with having helped to spark the Arab Spring. Her leaks also strengthened the position of Iraqi parliamentarians who voted to eject U.S. forces from the country at the end of 2011. Manning’s exposés also emboldened transparency activists from across the Middle East to NSA leaker Edward Snowden.

**MANNING IN HER OWN WORDS**

“God knows what happens now. Hopefully worldwide discussion, debates, and reforms... I want people to see the truth... because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public.” —From an online chat attributed to Private Manning

**WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING**

“Manning’s disclosures to WikiLeaks only ‘aided the enemy,’ as his prosecutors charge, if the enemy is international cooperation and peace itself.” —Mairead Corrigan-Maguire (1976 Nobel Peace Prize winner)

**LEGAL STATUS**

Manning was sentenced in August to 35 years in prison after a military judge found her guilty of 20 charges, including espionage. The earliest Manning could be released on parole is 2020.

**GENDER STATUS**

On the day after her sentencing, Manning announced that she identified as a female and wished to be known as Chelsea Manning. Manning has petitioned the Army to provide her with hormone therapy. To date, the Army has denied the request and has refused to recognize Manning’s name change.

**PRISON ADDRESS**

PVT Bradley E Manning

89289

1300 N Warehouse Rd

Ft Leavenworth, KS 66027-2304

**ON THE WEB**

[www.privatemanning.org](http://www.privatemanning.org)

# CHELSEA MANNING

(FORMERLY KNOWN AS BRADLEY MANNING)

**Law and Disorder radio**

**WBAI**  
99.5 FM

**Mondays at 9am**

**DOWNLOAD PODCASTS**  
at [lawanddisorder.org](http://lawanddisorder.org)

“Our basic constitutional rights are in jeopardy. “Law and Disorder” is an excellent magazine format radio show, hosted by progressive lawyers who analyze the state of civil rights in this post-9/11 period. From attacks on Muslims at home to torture abroad, “Law and Disorder” puts these constitutional attacks into perspective.”

—AMY GOODMAN,  
HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!

Hosted by movement lawyers Heidi Boghosian, Executive Director, National Lawyers Guild; Michael Ratner, President, Center for Constitutional Rights; Michael Smith, New York City attorney and author

Now on Facebook.com

**bluestockings**  
radical bookstore | activist center | fair trade cafe  
172 ALLEN ST • 212-777-6028  
[bluestockings.com](http://bluestockings.com)

**in the Air** — Max Elbau

**FEMINIST THEO**  
FROM MARGIN TO C

**THURS NOV 7 • 7PM • FREE**  
BOOK TALK: “FRESH FRUIT, BROKEN BODIES: MIGRANT FARMWORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES.”  
A critical look at US immigration and agriculture policy with author Seth M. Holmes.

**TUES NOV 12 • 7PM • FREE**  
SCREENING: “HERMAN’S HOUSE.”  
Documentary that chronicles the friendship between artist Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace, one of the political prisoners of the Angola 3. Discussion with Jackie Sumell and director Angad Bhalla to follow.

**FRI NOV 22 • 7PM • FREE**  
DISCUSSION: STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE IN NUYORICAN AND LATINA COMING-OF-AGE STORIES.  
With writer and editor Jane Heil Usyk.

**RESIST!**  
ZAPATISTA STO

**S HISTORY**  
**ED STATES**

## HEALTH CARE FOR ALL

### Obamacare

*Continued from page 9*

safety-net hospitals. And under Obamacare, public insurances are becoming more privatized.

Medicaid is state health insurance for people with low incomes. More states are moving their Medicaid patients into managed care organizations (MCOs). MCOs, such as Amerigroup which was bought by WellPoint after Obamacare passed, are for-profit administrators that compete with each other to cover the healthiest patients and are incentivized to cut care. Currently 75 percent of Medicaid patients are in MCOs and that number is expected to increase further under Obamacare.

Medicare is public insurance for people 65 years of age and older and who are disabled. One of the early goals of Obamacare was to cut back on Medicare Advantage plans, which are essentially private insurance plans paid for through Medicare. The Advantage plans primarily insure the healthiest seniors and cost more than traditional Medicare. Instead of cutting back, the Obama administration boosted payment to the Advantage plans. And enrollment in the plans has increased by 30 percent since 2010.

There is good reason to suspect that Medicare may be completely privatized in the coming years by being turned into a defined premium plan rather than the defined benefit plan that it is now. This

means that seniors would receive a certain amount of money each year to purchase private insurance instead of knowing each year that they would have Medicare with its required benefits. This is the plan being pushed by Republican Congressman Paul Ryan. The idea came out of the National Commission for Fiscal Responsibility and Reform created by President Obama in 2010.

#### NOT THE REFORM WE NEED

Looking at Obamacare from a distance, it is difficult to see it as anything more than a law designed by and for the health industries that profit from the current health system. The regulations can be circumvented or waived. The insurers can continue to find innovative ways to avoid the sick and not pay for care. And overall the system is becoming more privatized, which is the opposite direction from the real solution, Medicare for all.

Medicare for all, also called single-payer, would create a health system that treats health care as a public good rather than as a commodity. The system would be paid for up front through progressive taxation. There would be no premiums or out of pocket costs, so while taxes would be higher, people would be able to get the health care they need rather than being limited to what they could afford.

In a Medicare-for-all system, every person in the United States would be in the system from birth to death and it would cover all necessary care. It would be much simpler to use because there would be one set of rules and all health professionals would be included. People would have more choices of where to go for care and would be able to change jobs or travel freely without worrying about not being covered. Barriers to receiving care would be removed. There would be no more worries about whether a person qualifies for this or that because everyone would have access to the same standard of care.

Current health care spending in the United States is more than adequate to pay for a Medicare-for-all system. This has been proven time and again in studies at the state and national levels. In fact, a Medicare-for-all system would allow better management of our health care dollars and the ability to negotiate for fair prices for medications and services. And Medicare for all would have a broader impact on our public policy because the bottom line would be public health rather than profits. Clean air and water, access to healthy food and fewer toxins in consumer products would reduce health care spending rather than padding the pockets of the health industry.

ing rather than padding the pockets of the health industry.

The work for Medicare for all continues. There is a bill, HR 676, in the House of Representatives that is collecting co-sponsors and which outlines a Medicare-for-all plan. Single-payer

groups throughout the country continue to press forward. And Physicians for a National Health Program will continue to document the problems with our health system and educate about Medicare for all. It’s crucial that single-payer supporters continue to articulate what a real solution to our health care crisis would look like and not silence themselves out of a misguided desire to shield Obama and the Democrats and the poor decisions they have made from attacks by Republican demagogues.

We cannot cross our fingers and hope that Obamacare “works.” That attitude means hundreds of thousands will suffer and die from preventable causes and millions of families each year will continue to go bankrupt because of medical illness and costs. The moral imperative is to realize that health care never has been and never will be a commodity and to stop treating it as such by taking it out of the marketplace altogether.

*Margaret Flowers is a pediatrician and co-chair of the Maryland chapter of Physicians for a National Health Plan. She serves on the board of Healthcare-Now and of the Maryland Health Care is a Human Right campaign. She is also an editor at [popularresistance.org](http://popularresistance.org).*

*I am a designer.*

*I have designed for the Green Party, WBAI, and this issue of the Indy.*

*I can design for you.*

CELEBRATING

20 years

SERVING MANHATTAN

*Is it really Free?* The answer is simply “yes.” Manhattan Neighborhood Network has been serving the Manhattan community with **FREE** access to video equipment for over 15 years. We only thrive if Manhattan Residents use our **FREE** equipment.

*Don't know how to use it?* We also have **FREE** Final Cut Studio Classes. All you have to do is bring in proof that you live in Manhattan!

**MNN**

537 West 59th Street

| [www.mnn.org](http://www.mnn.org)

| 212-757-2670 x312

| Facebook + Twitter

*\*For Manhattan Residents ONLY*

# Mastering Cliteracy

INTERVIEW BY  
ALINA MOGILYANSKAYA

**F**reedom in society can be measured by the distribution of orgasms." This is *Natural Law #31* of Brooklyn-based artist Sophia Wallace's *Cliteracy*, 100 *Natural Laws* project, a 10 by 13 foot mixed-media installation that gets everyone talking about the clitoris. This past summer Wallace, in collaboration with sculptor Kenneth Thomas, also turned *Cliteracy* into an interactive performance piece, hosting a Clit Rodeo that featured a massive, golden and — yes, rideable — clitoris.

*Cliteracy* places women's sexual pleasure front and center, and challenges dominant representations of and beliefs about female sexuality. Surprisingly recent scientific research, first published 15 years ago, revealed that contrary to popular belief most of the clitoris is internal and can be up to 9-11 centimeters long. Hence, *Natural Law #4*: "The clitoris is not a button, it is an iceberg."

Wallace shared some of her thoughts about sex, art and the clit with *The Independent*.

**ALINA MOGILYANSKAYA:** How would you say that *Cliteracy* intervenes into or subverts prevailing sexual norms, and the social and

political norms that surround them?

**SOPHIA WALLACE:** One of the first ways that *Cliteracy* intervenes is that it says, first of all, this paradigm of the phallus versus the lack is a false paradigm. The idea that the male body has an object and the female body has an empty void that can only be activated by the male body is based on ignorance, bad science, and a pretty intense agenda of control.

And, in fact, the female body has its own autonomous sexual organ that is whole, is fascinating, is powerful, has 8,000 nerves, has a direct blood supply in a way that the penis doesn't. It doesn't make it in any way superior, but it does make it interesting.

**AM:** Is there something specific that prompted this project or inspired it?

**SW:** My training is in photography. And in my photo work, I'm interested in power: how power is represented visually and how power normalizes itself. I started thinking about sex and asking, how is it possible that today, you never see the clit engaged in depictions of sex?

And we know that the vast majority of women — 70 or 80 percent, or even more — orgasm only when their external clit is stimulated, and only when it's stimulated the entire



**YEE-HAW!** A woman rides a giant golden clitoris during the *Clit Rodeo* that was held at the Wassaic Arts Festival in upstate New York, August 2-3.

time. So how is it possible that we never see this anywhere? And moreover, how is it that women are still having so much bad sex and lying about it?

But I knew with this subject that photographs would not help me in any way. If anything, pictures would do harm by giving the false impression that by seeing the clit, it could be known. I wanted to do something architectural and complex, something that dwarfs the physical body, that can't be consumed in a moment and that can't be glanced upon and then treated as known.

**AM:** What was your personal experience with sexual education?

**SW:** The first time I heard the word rape, I think I was in second or third grade, and I was devastated to understand the definition of that word. One wishes they could unlearn that idea. Unfortunately I think having a female body and learning that word is something that you can't really ever escape.

From a very young age, girls are psychically separated from their own bodies. Sexual education talks about the male body as reproductive and as sexual. Boys have erections, boys have wet dreams, boys also have semen. Female bodies have menstruation and can deliver babies. The clitoris isn't really talked about in sexual education; neither is female desire. The idea of a woman having sex but not receiving pleasure is never problematized.

**AM:** What would you say to someone who is about to walk into the Clit Rodeo for the first time?

**SW:** The only rules of the rodeo are 1. Respect the clit, and 2. Have a good time.

When we hosted the *Clit Rodeo* at the Wassaic Art Festival in upstate New York in early August, the only *faux pas* was the presence of a couple of people who wanted to sign up with their rodeo name being "the pussy destroyer" or the "clit wrecker." The choice to use that kind of language says a lot. Conceptually, the clit is the hero of the rodeo. What are we dominating? We're dominating these ideas of hierarchy and taboo. And

what are we destroying? We're destroying this residue of shame and this way of cleaving off some bodies from other bodies. So that's what should be destroyed, not ever the clit.

**AM:** What are some of the most interesting responses you're getting?

**SW:** Recently I got an email from a woman in France who said she found my project and shared it with her boyfriend, and that now she's satisfied for the first time since they've been together. It was amazing.

And then there are also teenagers who have written me and said, "I always thought that sex was supposed to hurt. Now, for the first time, I realize that maybe it doesn't have to and that I don't have to wait for it to feel good or accept if it doesn't."

And then also women writing me and saying, "I used to try to touch my clit when I'd be having sex with boyfriends and they would smack my hand away, so I just stopped." And on and on.

**AM:** When I look at the project, I see on one hand that it's all about information, celebration and pleasure. On the other hand, there's a deep sense of indignation. What informs that latter aspect of it?

**SW:** I haven't had any sort of terrible thing happen to me. But I know so many women who have experienced rape and who have had their bodies abused. The government doesn't care about it, society doesn't care about it, religious authorities don't care about it. But it happens over and over again. This is something to be enraged about.

Also, I'm queer and I feel that I don't have anything to lose. I think my sexuality is already pathologized. It's already outside and already treated as the "other." But being queer also gives me the insight that sex can always be pleasurable. In queer sex, everyone has an orgasm. If you don't, you don't keep sleeping together. It's informed me in the sense that I don't accept the current status quo — I can see that it's completely constructed and normalized, and it doesn't have to be that way.

**AM:** For our readers who may not

know what queer sex is, how would you define it?

**SW:** I would say queer sex is multiple things. It's often two same-sex people having sex, but it can also be straight people who have a queer approach to their relationship. They reject heterosexism, they reject the hierarchy between men and women, they understand that men can also enjoy being on the receiving side of penetration, or being tops or bottoms. And women can enjoy a range of things as well.

Queer is also a political position. It's about sex that is beyond the obsessive fetish of reproduction. Sex that's about real pleasure for everybody.

**AM:** What has been your experience with politics?

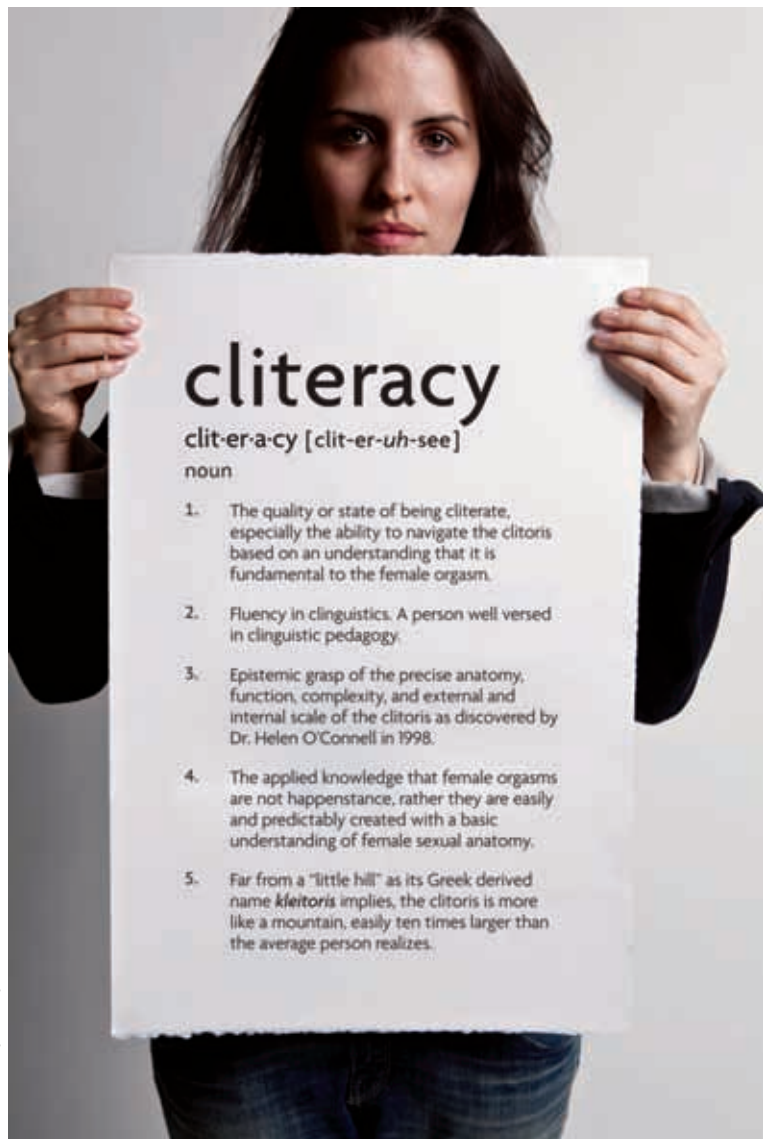
**SW:** I was demonstrating since the first time we invaded Iraq in 1991. My parents were very political. I went to a very progressive, student-led school in Seattle, and there I was doing a lot of political work with former Black Panthers and others.

Some people tell me, "You're not an artist, you're an activist. Your work is so political; the art world doesn't have space for that." My response is that people make art from very different places and historically there have always been artists who make work out of their condition in the world, make work to affect some kind of change. And I happen to be one of those.

**AM:** What's next?

**SW:** Now on the horizon is translating *Cliteracy* into different languages, and I'm currently looking for additional patrons to support doing an exhibition of it on billboards around New York and the country. I would love to carve the *100 Natural Laws* into marble and install the sculpture on the ground permanently, to have it be there for 500 years. I would love for a monument with this type of text and information to exist in a public space.

For more information about *Cliteracy*, see [sophiawallace.tumblr.com](http://sophiawallace.tumblr.com) and [sophiawallace.com](http://sophiawallace.com).



SOPHIA WALLACE STUDIO

# Awakening to the Power Within

BY EVE STEINEM

I had my first orgasm when I was 11 years old. I was sitting in the tub, washing myself like I did everyday. Only, something felt different. I paused, curious, and wondered why the water felt so incredible — particularly when it hit a certain spot. In half-fascination and half-fear, I felt a strange, pleasurable energy building up below my navel — curious at what would happen when I reached the brink — until I did. I fell backwards in the tub, startled, as the waves of ecstasy engulfed me.

I felt a little guilty, like I had done something that I wasn't supposed to. The word "orgasm" wasn't even a part of my vocabulary at that time. Shame poked its way into my conscience, but I pushed it back as I thought, "If it's so bad, why does it feel so amazing?"

If my body can do it naturally, it mustn't be wrong." Needless to say, I took many happy baths after that.

But it wasn't simple. My

mother and father avoided conversations about sex, and would quickly and abruptly change the channel on the TV whenever something remotely sexual was broadcast. They would frown or make disapproving comments when they heard news about teenagers or people engaged in any sort of sexual activity. It made me feel that to be sexual in any way is shameful; that it was always somehow wrong, no matter how natural it felt.

Over the next several years, despite the stigma and guilt, plea-

suring myself a few times a week became as regular a part of my routine as going to school. Face flushed and feeling rejuvenated, I would sometimes bounce out of bed in the morning and get ready for my day with tingles of pleasure running down my spine. Over time, I felt more alive and at home in my body. If anything, masturbating allowed me to become deeper in tune with its cycles and look at myself naked with less and less shame.

As a teenager, I found out that the source of my pleasure was my clitoris, a fact that was oh-so-conveniently left out of our yearly body and sex talks at school. I was perplexed. I felt that other girls should know just how incredible our bodies are, not just for making babies, but for inducing mind-blowing — and multiple! — orgasms. But like most girls growing up, I stayed si-

focused on male pleasure, women's pleasure is mostly talked about in the context of pleasing the men they are with rather than for its sake alone. Although research and debate about the clitoris has existed for centuries, it is only in 1998, with the publication of Australian urologist Helen O'Connell's breakthrough study on the organ, that we even learned about its actual size. That small "button" normally associated with the clitoris is only the tip of the iceberg: as O'Connell wrote, much of the organ is internal, and the unerect clitoris could be up to nine centimeters long.

Some advice: get to know yourself down there. Learn how to pleasure and express yourself. Be a little selfish. Do your own research on your body and find out what feels good for you. Even if your sexual urge is low, knowledge is power. It is also the first step toward understanding the desires you do or don't have.

Today, when I pleasure myself, it no longer feels like an internal battle or a shameful secret I must keep from others. Today, I have more power over my body than any man that I'm with does, and that not only inspires them enough to learn more but also leaves them in awe. Today, knowing myself and being able to pleasure myself and appreciate my body's potential is not just empowering, but divine.

*Eve Steinem is a pen name for a New York City-based feminist writer.*

lent. The topic of masturbation was not one to discuss.

Luckily, today we are having more conversations about women's sexual pleasure, the clitoris, the G-Spot, and what turns us on and why. But there is still a long road ahead for women — and let's be frank, men too — in educating ourselves about our bodies, anatomically, sexually and emotionally, and in reaching a fuller sexual awareness and strength.

In a society where mainstream representations of sex are mainly

FACE FLUSHED AND REJUVENATED, I WOULD SOMETIMES BOUNCE OUT OF BED IN THE MORNING AND GET READY FOR MY DAY WITH TINGLES OF PLEASURE RUNNING DOWN MY SPINE.



SIGN OF THE TIMES: Sophia Wallace's 100 Natural Laws has appeared in New York as a 10 by 13 foot art installation illuminated by a six-foot neon "Cliteracy" sign.

# BRUNY NYC

# FEUNY C

# NSAFTPC

# NYNFOPO

# XODO

NOV 16TH 2013 RIDE 4PM GAP

## R\$VP

NYC@CARGOBIKECOLLECTIVE.COM PARTY

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**THU, NOV 7 • 7:30-9:30pm**  
**BOOK PARTY / FORUM**  
Co-sponsors: Haymarket Books & Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung  
**They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return from America's Wars**  
Ann Jones  
Sliding scale: \$6/\$10/\$15

**MON, NOV 11 • 5:30-7:30pm**  
**6-SESSION CLASS BEGINS**  
**LITERATURE & REVOLUTION SERIES**  
Year One of the Russian Revolution  
Taught by Richard Greeman  
Sliding scale: \$65 - \$85

**SAT, NOV 23 • 10:00am-6:00pm**  
**2-DAY WORKSHOP BEGINS**  
Co-sponsor: Theater of the Oppressed Laboratory  
**Cop-in-the-Head**  
Facilitated by Kayhan Irani & Marie-Claire Picher  
Sliding scale: \$95 - \$150

# THE BRECHT FORUM

BUILDING A MOVEMENT THAT MOVES

Please register online: [brechtforum.org](http://brechtforum.org)  
212-242-4201

The Brecht Forum @ The Commons  
388 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn  
(Between Bond & Hoyt Streets)



# 'Call It Affirmative Action Orgasms'

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

"Here," I said, and gave her a petite, tourist shop bell. "If you're stressed out, bored and want an orgasm, ring it." She stared at me and a cascade of emotions washed over her face. "Are you serious?" She asked.

Sitting next to her, I placed it in her palm. "Want me to wear a bowtie and white gloves? You can call me Mr. Belvedere."

She playfully punched my chest. "Don't bring up '80s television, it was a bad time for everyone." After studying the bell, she put it down. "Why are you doing this?"

"I want to be on the right side of history," I said. She shook her head and splayed her hands with a What-Are-You-Talking-About look.

"The orgasm gap." I breathed in big, then exhaled. "Men get off more and more often. I thought about what you told me about your last partner. I want to, I mean, I think it would be good to try to make up for lost pleasure."

"My orgasms are not orphans," she said sharply.

"No, I know," I replied.

"My orgasms are not runaway kids sleeping under a bridge," she pushed. "It's not your job to rescue them."

"Of course," I said. "Of course."

She held the bell up and without looking at me said, "I'm sorry. You know, it's true, I'm shy about coming. When I do, I look away or bury my face in the pillows."

I nodded and kept quiet. "It's always been like that." She turned to me. "I mean, I love sex." Her voice lifted in apology and then her eyes lowered, as if sifting the silence for a way out of the awkwardness.

She didn't ring the bell that day, or the day that followed. I made the daily circle between home and work. Sometimes she was with me, sometimes she wasn't. The bell sat on the desk. I eventually forgot about it, except when we made love and she buried her face in the pillows.

## UNDER THE SILENCE

Before leaving my apartment, she stuffed her books and video camera into a backpack that hung on her like a giant snail shell. She's a visual artist and weeks ago, had sent me a link to her work. In one clip, holding her high school diary, she read her adolescent confessionals to a packed room. It was raw, uncomfortably raw. I cringed at the rising panic in her entries until it peaked in a stark moment of her saying, "I am ugly. No one will love me."

Watching the clip, I heard the audience gasp, then say, "Awww." They wanted to reach out to her and embrace the hurt, confused, self-doubting young girl, but she was buried deep within the adult who made a career of recreating herself in public.

The power of her performance wasn't in

the ex-prosures of adolescent pain but in the strength to look back and measure its distance. The next day I taught my college literature class, read students' papers and saw how close those hurts still were for them. Many of those painful experiences had just been lived, and some of the wounds were openly bleeding into the pages of their memoirs. And of course it always hit the women hardest.

I asked the female students if they'd ever felt themselves to be ugly. Nearly all raised their hands. I asked if they or if someone they knew had been raped. Nearly all raised their hands. I asked the same question about secret abortions and sexual harassment. In the tense silence, one of them looked around the room, filled with arms standing like flagpoles and said, "Why is this happening to us?"

## THE SEXIST GAUNTLET

On my way home, I heard her question over and over in my mind. And asked myself, what if I was a woman? Same butter

**SHE DIDN'T RING THE BELL THAT DAY, OR THE DAY THAT FOLLOWED. THE BELL SAT ON THE DESK. I EVENTUALLY FORGOT ABOUT IT, EXCEPT WHEN WE MADE LOVE AND SHE BURIED HER FACE IN THE PILLOWS.**

pecan complexion, same curly hair. I have big hips for a guy, been told that my whole life. But as a woman my ass and hips would be a swinging bull's eye for men. Would I straighten my hair? Yes, because I'm vain and ambitious. All in all, I thought, I would be a sexy fucking lady.

But when I looked down the street and saw the men there, some of them my friends, I felt naked, vulnerable in my imagined body. I wouldn't be able to just walk by them. They would dissect my breasts and legs with their eyes. They would catcall. They would order me to smile. Some would walk beside me, trying to pull my name or get my number. And if I didn't answer they'd curse me.



BETH WHITNEY

judgment, the fear, the limits that women feel and I felt angry, ashamed. On a systemic level, men have to work with other men to push against sexism, I get that, I do

Every day, I would have to untangle myself from their voices that crisscrossed the sidewalk like fishing lines. I would wear headphones like a helmet to shield myself against the blast of their open lust. If I stayed late at work or wanted to go out it would be an issue. At night, whole sections of the city are off-limits to a woman.

What if I was a working-class woman and no Prince Charming came for me? If I were a straight woman, I'd have to find a lover among these men. Behind closed doors, I would be near their volcanic egos that spewed hot chunks of hurt. Building a life with them would mean having to trust someone who seemed to be sinking into debt, into jail, into a bottle or just into bleak-eyed work that, like mine, left little time to find oneself.

And what if I as a woman met me? How would I as a man treat me as a woman? I wondered about the silent judgments that would be made. Would I have to prove my worth to him? Would his male privileges be a lacquer that glazed his thinking? Would he hurt me? Knowing my combustible mix of arrogance and insecurity, I was forced to admit that yes, yes I would.

Turning the corner, I imagined the weight that women must physically feel. Sure, some have class or racial privileges that lessen it, but even just this brief fantasy made me feel like a spectacle for men. I hated having my movements hemmed in by fear. Anger knotted my forehead. I looked at the men I knew, who saw me and waved. I gritted my teeth.

## THE BELL CURVE

When I saw my lover the next day I apologized for the bell. "It was a stupid idea," I said and shrugged. "I thought about the self-

but instead of 'blah, blah, blah' why can't we actually commit time to repairing some of the damage? And pleasure can heal."

She eyed me without saying anything. She was a quiet thinker — radiant constellations flashed continuously in her eyes but it took days before she told me about her decisions. And now she studied my face and I felt like glass.

"It's about justice. A straight man in a relationship with a woman should be getting her off at least four times a day. I don't know." I threw up my hands. "Call it Affirmative Action Orgasms."

"Is that really all it's about?" she asked.

"No," I muttered and went to my desk. "It's my way of penance."

Sitting down, I began doing school work. Then I heard the bell ring. Turning around, I saw her smiling. She patted her inner thighs. "Reparations?"

I got up laughing and we fell in together. An hour later, I was doing work again when she rang the bell. "Seriously?" I asked. "If you want world peace," she said making gang signs over her pubic hair, "Come eat me out."

When she rang, I answered. If I was cooking and heard the bell, I turned off the oven and went to her. If I was reading or writing and heard the bell, I put the work down and went to her. If she was in the shower and rang the bell, I came in. Over those first two weeks, I saw a bright joy begin to illuminate her face. Her body's rhythms became as sweeping as ocean tides that erased and redrew her self-image. An easy, flowing generosity filled our nights together.

One evening, I was drinking with friends when my cell phoned beeped. I answered it and heard a bell ringing. Instantly I got up, and they asked where I was going. "I have to do reparations," I said. They looked at me, eyes scrunched, not understanding.

"You guys should definitely look into getting bells," I said smiling, and left.

## Clashing Visions of Black American Life

*Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*

GREY ART GALLERY, NYU  
THROUGH DECEMBER 7  
STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM  
NOVEMBER 14–MARCH 9

*Claiming Citizenship: African Americans and New Deal Photography*

SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH  
IN BLACK CULTURE  
THROUGH JANUARY 4



**DIGESTING THE NEWS:** Pope L. performing *Eating the Wall Street Journal* (2000), The Sculpture Center, New York, 2000. Courtesy the artist. Installation on view at Grey Art Gallery, NYU.

I keep thinking about the guy, punching himself in front of the grocery store. In 2000, performance artist Dave McKenzie made the video *Edward and Me*: he stood in the entrance to an anonymous supermarket, flailing and thrashing as if tormented by invisible demons (an homage to Edward Norton's torn-apart character in *Fight Club*). More than just nighttime hi-jinx (though it's that, too), McKenzie's performance shows a young, Black man taking momentary control of a suburban landscape, an environment that draws significance from how nondescript, how totally "normal" it looks. Going back several generations, we find John Vachon's *Housing project for Negroes, row of finished homes*, a 1937 photo showing a sunny street of suburban houses in Newport News, Virginia. Again, the landscape is utterly "normal," except that it isn't: it marks one of the federal government's first attempts at providing decent housing for Black families.

McKenzie's video is part of

"Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art," currently on view at NYU's Grey Gallery (with more to come this November at the Studio Museum in Harlem). The Vachon photo is part of "Claiming Citizenship: African Americans and New Deal Photography," on view at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center, in Harlem (along with "Schomburg Collects WPA Artists 1935-1943," a handsome show of visual art from the period).

Together, the two exhibits give simultaneously clashing and complementary visions of Black American life. "Radical Presence" shows actions that play with the outer edges of social propriety, like Pope L.'s *Eating the Wall Street Journal* (2000), in which the artist — nearly naked, covered in flour and sitting on a toilet — went about reading, eating and regurgitating ketchup-soaked scraps of the famously conservative newspaper. "Claiming Citizenship," meanwhile, presents news pho-

tos that seem primed to convince cynical, white Americans that Black people are, well, normal. One of the exhibit's best images is a detailed shot of a 1942 auto repair class in Rockville, Maryland. In the context of "Claiming Citizenship," the photo reminds us that these otherwise placid images — of Black people working, attending classes or enjoying time at home — appear not as givens, but as things that had to be fought for: part of an incredibly fraught historical trajectory.

"Claiming Citizenship" points out that "citizenship" is different from "freedom" — shot around 70 years after the end of slavery in the United States, the photographs in the exhibit show Black Americans actively engaging with conditions of citizenship rather than just simple survival. The exhibit posits "citizenship" as the right to (among other things) "possess economic security," "engage in civic life," "be educated persons," "receive health care," "have a publicly acknowledged history" and, of course, "vote."

To that end, we see schoolchildren peering through microscopes, couples purchasing homes and men receiving doctor's exams. One of my favorite shots is a harshly lit portrait of sculptor and teacher Henry Bannarn — of the Harlem Community Art Center — gazing intently into the camera as he presents a finely-crafted female nude. Over at "Radical Presence," we see Lorraine O'Grady performing as the imaginary African beauty queen Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire, storming into 1980s art-world cocktail parties with her sash and tiara, reciting manifestoes and beating herself with a whip. O'Grady's performances were meant to highlight a lack of Black, female presence in the art world as well as in other intellec-



**NEW DEAL:** Young boys wait their turn to be examined by a doctor at the WPA-built Slossfield Health Center in Birmingham, Alabama, June 1938.

tual spheres (feminist scholarship, for example).

Similar to how Pope L.'s grotesque, flour-doused absorption of the *Wall Street Journal* speaks to the condition of a perplexed outsider — someone going about everything the incorrect way — O'Grady's performances draw off a salient, perpetual otherness. We've come a long way from WPA relief efforts, but some of the impulses that informed those 1930s photos can be found in the work of these contemporary artists: identifying the varieties of exclusion, the things that keep Black citizens away from those echelons of culture that have remained, pretty much, whites-only.

Other work in "Radical Presence" looks at how each new generation receives and tries to make sense of Black history. In Sherman Fleming's *Pretending to Be Rock* (1993), the artist stayed on his hands and knees for hours, as hot wax from a candelabrum coated his nearly naked body. The piece gets some energy from sexualized club culture, while making clear

allusions to the subjugation of Black men in America's dark past.

In 2013, though, this past maybe isn't as past as we'd like: after the Supreme Court's recent gutting of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, several states (including Texas, North Carolina and Virginia) are in the process of enacting voter ID laws that would disproportionately prevent people of color from being able to vote. "Claiming Citizenship" includes a strong 1942 photo by Marjory Collins called *Showing a Negro how to vote at the polls on election day*: it shows an older Black man confronting a voting machine, probably for the first time. This image was, perhaps, radical when it was first taken. Who would've imagined that even now, and despite so much, this sort of action could still be an affront to prevailing norms? That this image could still be, somehow, radical?

— MIKE NEWTON

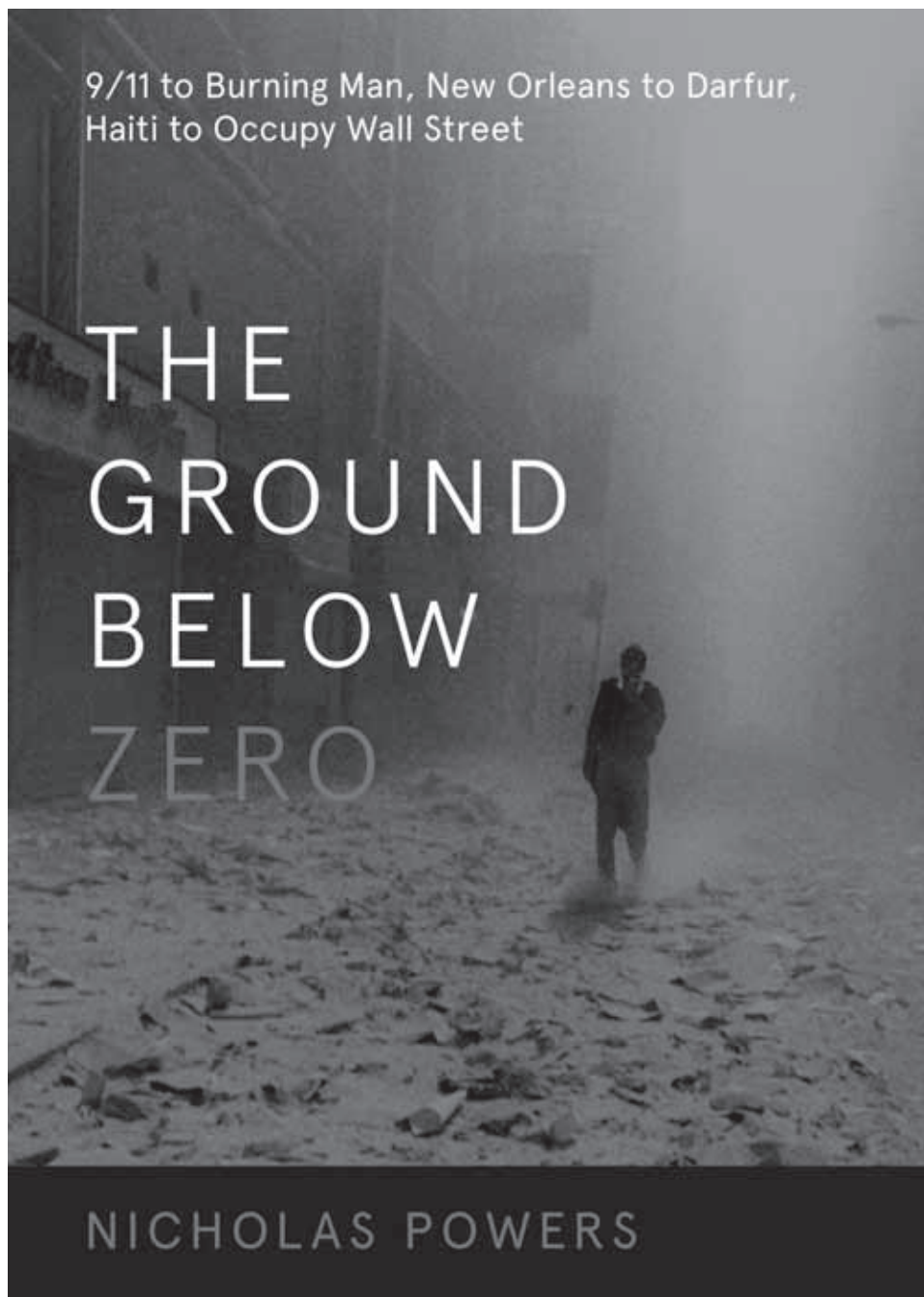


**TAKING SHAPE:** Henry Bannarn, a sculptor of the NYC WPA Art Project and a teacher at the Harlem Community Art Center, displays one of his works.

# THE GROUND BELOW ZERO

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

*In his richly layered new book, The Independent's Nicholas Powers fuses journalism, memoir and apocalyptic fantasy as he looks back on the years from 9/11 to Occupy Wall Street.*



*“High pressure vivid writing...Powers reminds us all politics is local, and more than local, personal — and deeper than personal, intimate.”*

— REVEREND BILLY

(Author of *What Would Jesus Buy? Fabulous Prayers in the Face of the Shopocalypse*)

*“Powers takes the most contemporary social issues and events of our generation and examines them from a very personal place seldom seen in the media...A must read for those interested in political, psychological and social development.”*

— LEE MAYJAHS

(The Philadelphia Experiment)

*“Introduces a new and important voice, one with a trajectory reaching from New York's left and alternative cultures to the present world's vistas of death.”*

— CHRISTOPHER Z. HOBSON

(Author of *The Mount of Prophetic Vision: African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800-1950*)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas Powers is a poet, journalist and professor. He teaches literature at SUNY Old Westbury and co-hosts the long running New York City College Poetry Slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. He has written for *The Independent* since 2004.

## WHERE TO GET THE BOOK

Copies available in bookstores and online at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and [uapress.com/titles/upset/upset](http://uapress.com/titles/upset/upset). Or, help support independent media by purchasing a copy of *The Ground Below Zero* from *The Independent* for only \$35. (See details below)

**YES, I WANT TO SUPPORT THE NEWSPAPER THAT PUBLISHES BOLD, INDEPENDENT VOICES LIKE NICHOLAS POWERS BY ORDERING A COPY OF THE GROUND BELOW ZERO.**

**\$35    \$100 (ANGEL CONTRIBUTION)**

**ORDER FORM**

**NAME**

**ADDRESS**

**CITY, STATE/ZIP**

**EMAIL**

**TEL. #**

**SEND CHECK OR MONEY ORDER TO THE INDYPENDENT • PO BOX 1043 • NEW YORK, NY • 10276 — OR ORDER ONLINE AT [WEPAY.COM/STORES/THE-INDYPENDENT](http://WEPAY.COM/STORES/THE-INDYPENDENT).**

# Chicha Libre Flows Freely in Brooklyn

BY DAVID MEADOW

Globalization isn't a new phenomenon. Still, it's easy to forget how much rapid cross-pollination existed even before this century.

Starting in the 1960s in the Peruvian Amazon, largely poor, indigenous oil-boom workers mashed up the Afro-Caribbean rhythms of Colombian cumbia with Peruvian indigenous music and surf and psychedelic guitar riffs from the United States. In hindhearing, the music that resulted could easily have come from some of today's better "world music" acts, if the recordings were slightly sharper. The pioneers of the 1960s and 70s dubbed their genre "chicha," after the delicious traditional Incan corn beer. Now, Brooklyn band Chicha Libre is updating it for our era.

Chicha Libre comprises an assortment of musicians from all over the Americas as well as two Europeans, the owners of Barbès, a bar and performance space in Brooklyn. The sextet rediscovered this glistening musical form and championed it with a long series of concerts around the world — not calling their own music "chicha," but certainly giving credit where it was due. Meanwhile, Barbès Records, a label affiliated with the bar, released a compilation in 2007 of near-forgotten original chicha gems. Chicha Libre, and its label, might well have jointly rescued chicha music from obscurity.

On October 14, I saw the band at its weekly performance at Barbès. Half the audience flailed ecstatically for two whole sets, and nearly everyone moved. The group puts a premium on juicy melodies and riffs — originals, chicha classics, even "Flight of the Valkyries" and some Serge Gainsbourg — which makes the music consistently absorbing and elevates it above pure dance grist (though it is quite danceable). And wildly diverse as all these threads are, the songs inescapably belong together.

The lynchpin sounds are guitar and keyboards. Vincent Douglas, guitarist, coaxes the perfect twangy surf tone out of a Gretsch and an arsenal of pedals. He must be sorely tempted to chord, but restrains himself — none of the huge, meaty riffs of "pure" rock styles here, and I can remember only a few occasional double-stops — and thus he transforms the electric guitar almost into a gritty, silvery, hard-edged wind instrument that seamlessly complements the keys while also allowing the other

instruments to shine through.

Joshua Camp, on keys, wrings serious atmosphere out of his small synthesizer and Roland accordion. He plasters various effects onto the latter, so that it evokes a plodding indie-rock Wurlitzer in one moment and the wistful-yet-sinister shimmer of Doors organist Ray Manzarek in another. Most striking, perhaps, is how he uses a classic wah-wah effect (long a guitar staple) to convert the accordion into a medium for just about anything. Camp tends to play the insistent arpeggio riffs that are usually assigned to a tré or other steel-string instrument in cumbia styles, and the resulting soulful quiver ventures into pleasant whimsy without ever becoming schlocky. He shares most of the vocals with Olivier Conan, who doubles on the Venezuelan cuatro, though the other players' voices turn up here and there. As lead singers, the two are by turns sardonic, regretful and lusty,

Conan's cuatro, and Nicholas Cudahy's rock-solid electric upright bass, play a mostly subliminal role in the ensemble. The watery strum of the guitar-like

cuatro is especially beautiful, but it was so quiet at this show that I wondered if the sound levels were actually set at what the band wanted. The percussionist who was subbing for regular Karina Colis burned up the timbales with great flair, and Neil Ochoa, while taking fewer and less flashy solos on the congas, nevertheless struck triumphant blows on the stop-time sections as he tottered and tottered and tumbled back into the groove with breathtaking syncopation.

Midway through the show, Conan broached a topic the young, chic, artsy, heavily-queer crowd had had stuck somewhere in their craws for the last dozen hours: "Happy Columbus Day! — Wait, should I say that?" A few "No!"s and mostly uneasy murmurs followed, but it wasn't hostile. Rather, it sounded like everyone in the room agreed on what globalization should and shouldn't be.

*Chicha Libre performs at Barbès Mondays at 9:30pm. For more information, see [barbesbrooklyn.com](http://barbesbrooklyn.com).*

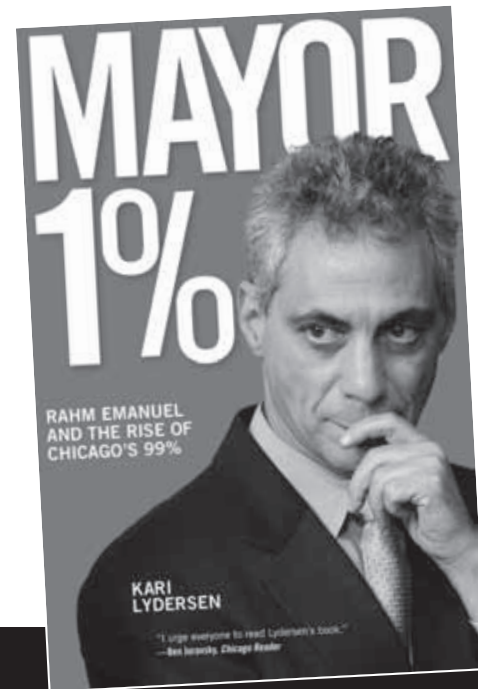


**GLOBAL FUSION:** Percussionist Neil Ochoa of the band Chicha Libre performs at Barbès bar in Brooklyn.

"This book provides deep insight into the political career of Rahm Emanuel. Painstakingly researched, *Mayor 1%* provides the reader with the ability to understand the hard line, neoliberal mindset that blinds the man to the harsh realities of entrenched poverty and disenfranchisement. The relentless attacks on Chicago's working class, from the janitors at O'Hare to the librarians, mental health workers and members of the Chicago Teachers Union have shown the true nature of a man who will have plenty of money from the billionaires to run his re-election campaign, but none of the love of the people who will not pull the lever for him. Kari

Lydersen ends on a hopeful note. That Mayor 1%'s brutal reign can actually lead to a better Chicago as people get up, stand up and fight the 'power.'"

—Karen Lewis, President, Chicago Teachers Union



[www.haymarketbooks.org](http://www.haymarketbooks.org)



**How will you get your summer reading this year?**

**For as little as \$15.00 a month we'll deliver every book AK Press publishes to you.**

**Be a friend, and sign up today!**

[www.akpress.org/friends.html](http://www.akpress.org/friends.html)

## Capitalism Gone Wild

*The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*

BY GEORGE PACKER

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, 2013

This American life is a mess, argues George Packer in *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*. It's a nation fraying, with core institutions from government and finance to housing, jobs and education dysfunctional or "unwound."

Packer, as befits a *New Yorker* staff writer, is a sharp stylist with a keen eye. While he does pay homage to the American ideal of self-reinvention and upward mobility that existed imperfectly at best in the past, he focuses his seemingly infinite capacity for listening on bringing to life the stark inequalities of a society that is experiencing contrasts in wealth and poverty not seen since the late 19th century. It's one in which billionaires and the homeless multiply while the proportion of middle-income families shrinks and where six of Sam Walton's heirs have as much accumulated wealth as the United States' bottom 30 percent.

His vision of an anomic, atomized America unfolds like a well-produced slideshow. Highlights include an insider's view of K Street swinishness, its manufacturing of "grasstop" coalitions and how lobbyists on Capitol Hill not only grease politician's palms but write legislation in the interest of no one but their own clients.

There's also great reporting on the epidemic of robo-signing, mortgage and security fraud, bank failure, securities fraud and bankruptcy. His pointing to the collapse of federal

THE  
UNWINDING  
AN INNER HISTORY  
OF THE NEW AMERICA  
GEORGE PACKER  
AUTHOR OF *THE ASSASSIN'S GATE*



regulations on bankers and traders that allowed for the Wall Street feeding frenzy is on target and a good introduction to the 2007-2008 collapse and its devastating consequences nationwide.

Taken singly, many of the chapters are brilliant, as is his coverage of the 2012 GOP convention and the ghost subdivisions and foreclosure wipeouts in Tampa, Florida. There's Youngstown, Ohio's shedding of 50,000 jobs (with a population of 150,000) and the vacating of 40 percent of its housing parcels in just 10 years. There's also devastating take-downs of the gremlin-like Newt Gingrich, the preposterous Oprah Winfrey and the weaselly Robert Rubin matched with fitting portraits of new Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and writer Raymond Carver, named "the chronicler of blue-collar despair."

A reviewer in *The Guardian* described his feelings after reading the more than 400 page tome as having "The sense of loneliness — of isolated souls, failed by their institutions, pummeled by the forces of big mon-

ey — seems to seep under your skin, and to stay there."

My reaction was that, too; it's a tough read when bad things happen to good people. Or when good things happen to the undeserving rich. Yet the pieces, exquisitely and intelligently drawn, don't make for a whole picture. Not only is there no unified

theory — it is, after all, journalism — there is no uniform explanation for the crises beyond hubris, the sclerosis of government and politicians unconscious when not themselves abetting crimes. We get a cataloging of malignity, venality, chaos and stupidity, as well as a growing list of victims. Like the libertarian masters of the universe in his tale, we have to do the theorizing for ourselves.

That's problematic because as accurate as the depictions are, they're static. His villains may know how to network, but his victims for the most part are loners, with little social interaction outside of their immediate family. It's as though he takes seriously the paradigm of the right — that society is a fiction — though he clearly despises the right's politics. And if America is unwinding, when was modern life ever a coherent whole? When was it ever "wound"?

Unfortunately, Packard's roster of villains is circumscribed. As responsible as they were for instigating the Great Recession, Wall Street and the securities industry were not the business centers solely at fault for the

lead-up to the collapse. An outsized military budget, imperial wars, the decline of unions as counterweights to corporate excesses and the flight of manufacturing overseas played their parts, too.

At bottom, despite the thick description in Packer's work, there's no sense of working people as actors, only as creatures acted upon. This may be true enough for the people profiled, at least initially, but weren't there other people in other areas who acted as their own social agents? His subjects are real enough, but they're presented without enough historical context to understand what options they had, if any, for a fight-back.

Here Packer could have taken the extra step of looking at the present crisis less as a failure of government to rein in the thieves — which it is — and more as capitalism unfolding in a global economy, as a process that creates not simply winners and losers but evolving social classes, learning from their mistakes and successes and — in the case of working people — rediscovering cultures of resistance.

In Youngstown, Tammy Thomas, a black worker at the then-prominent Packard Electric and single mother of three, goes to a union meeting. She finds it pointless — two white guys arguing, she tells Packer, and her description is doubtlessly right. But why was the meeting pointless? And was it always thus? Did this local union have a history of militancy? Of accommodation?

Thomas for one goes on to be a first-rate organizer, but that's due to the influence of an outside organization. Similarly the good guy in foreclosure-ravaged Tampa is a feisty local lawyer, not an affected homeowner. Were there no instances of community institutions that resisted the leveling of their world?

Packer rightly cites local critics

calling the funding for exurban Tampa's heady property-flipping a Ponzi scheme, and one with the active collusion of county commissioners, "but everything kept growing and no one paid attention," he writes, end quote. Why no attention?

And why, when almost all of his white characters are either moneyed libertarian ideologues or conservative Christians, does he give them such ample room to expound? Couldn't Packer have found even one semi-employed Marxist in one of the troubled locations to balance the picture? If Packer was stuck, he could have called me.

Packer exhibits both the strengths and weaknesses of mainstream newsgathering. Even when he refuses to sing hosannas to the rich and the ubercomfortable, instead acting as an informed and aggressive skeptic who tells oppressed people's stories so well, he never quite pulls the trigger. Nor does he seem to know he can.

Capitalism is about much more than conscious thievery, guilty individuals, enabling politicians and victims; it's a system that depends on exploitation and class division. It may require exploiters to tell out-sized moral tales about themselves, whether as members of yesterday's Calvinist elect or today's libertarians, but it's first a system of production, and an unstable one made up of real people in a real and conflict-ridden context. Why people do or do not make common cause and fight back — and what they fight for — are as much part of the story as are the hideous conditions they endure. That's the part Packer doesn't tell, and I wish he had.

—MICHAEL HIRSCH

## Testing Frenzy

*Continued from page 6*

the course of this year because the test will still be well above their reading comprehension level.

**Problem 3:** If the test can't accurately reflect student growth, it can't possibly be used to measure the quality of teaching.

The result, then, of a teacher evaluation deal driven by high stakes standardized tests, coupled with a public school system that bases student promotion decisions in grades 3-8 on high stakes test results, is an entire school system of teachers, students and parents held hostage by corporate-driven testing madness.

This evaluation deal comes on the heels of an onslaught of anti-teacher propaganda, posing teachers as the root of every problem facing our students and public schools and attacking the notion that teaching is a profession that requires experience and expertise.

Within the context of the budget cuts and neoliberal reforms sweeping the public sec-

tor, the evaluation deal is a nail in the coffin of teacher tenure and job protection, which all workers deserve.

"Advance" was brought in under the watch of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the union local that represents 75,000 New York City public school teachers. The rank-and-file members of the union, those who know best what works in classrooms, had no input on the deal and were not granted the right by their union to vote on what has amounted to the largest changes in our working conditions in decades.

What "Advance" is already doing is creating a climate of fear and anxiety in which test prep is seen as the most valuable use of our time. Test prep is not good curriculum. It is not engaging or designed to meet students where they're at. It does not inspire creativity or the risk-taking required for learning and growth.

The Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE), an opposition caucus within the UFT, launched a campaign calling for a moratorium on implementation of the teacher evaluation deal. MORE's position is that any

evaluation system based on high stakes standardized tests does not improve the learning conditions or achievement of our students, and does nothing to support teachers.

MORE will present petition signatures from UFT members citywide to the Delegate Assembly on November 16. Hundreds of UFT members have already signed the petition. MORE launched the petition campaign as a tool for members to organize their local chapters as well as being a means to reach a new layer of teachers frustrated by the evaluation system.

MORE is working in collaboration with Change the Stakes, a parent group speaking out against the use of high stakes testing in our schools. Change the Stakes is also working hard to spread the word about parents' right to opt students out of standardized tests, and is laying the groundwork for future opt-out campaigns in specific schools.

Should kindergarten teachers teach their students how to fill in bubbles for standardized tests? Teachers at Castle Bridge Elementary, a K-2 bilingual school in Washington Heights say "No." The school has canceled

the new standardized tests after more than 80 percent of parents opted their students out of the exam. Castle Bridge parents hope that other parents will hear their story and choose to opt their children out as well.

"Helping teachers or parents know where their children are is really not what the tests are about," says Dao Tran, a parent of a 1st grader at Castle Bridge. "They are really about gathering data on teachers that won't be accurate at all."

Herein lies the seed of real resistance — a true solidarity between teachers and parents that recognizes that the fight for public schools is the civil rights fight of our time. But we must take our lead, not from corporate reformers who haven't taught a minute in their lives and who do not rely on public education, but from the true stakeholders of public schools — parents, students and teachers.

*Emily Giles is an NYC public school teacher and a member of the Movement of Rank-and-file Educators (MORE). For more information, see [morecaucusnyc.org](http://morecaucusnyc.org).*

# 'I Thought I Was Going to Be This Big Fucking Superhero'

## A CONVERSATION WITH NICHOLAS POWERS

INTERVIEW BY NIA NOTTAGE

In August 2001, Nicholas Powers returned to New York to start a new life. He was born in Gotham, his mother a Latina anti-Vietnam War activist. They left when he was young. After college he worked as a Boston-area newspaper reporter and then moved on to begin his Ph.D studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. Working as an adjunct at Borough Manhattan Community College, he walked past the rubble of the Twin Towers on his way to class. "9/11 was the first time I experienced history right in my face," he recalled.

As cremation dust hung in the air, he wrestled with questions of how history changes us and how to bear witness to pain while offering hope of a better world.

Powers' new book, *The Ground Below Zero*, is a record of the deeply personal odyssey that followed. Tragedy and ecstasy fuse together in his narrative. We see through his eyes Hurricane Katrina flooding New Orleans, the rubble of Port au Prince in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, the anti-Iraq War protests and the rise of Occupy Wall Street.

**NIA NOTTAGE:** Many of the essays in your book originally appeared as articles in *The Independent*. Describe some of your intentions going into writing these articles. How did you initially get involved with the *Indy* and at what point did you decide to turn your work for them into a book?

**NICHOLAS POWERS:** In 2004, I was studying at the CUNY Graduate Center when I saw a copy of the *Indy*. It had a call for writers. My first essays took cultural theory and used it as a prism to analyze politics; Slavoj Žižek, Roland Barthes and Sigmund Freud were my influences. After I came back from reporting in post-Katrina New Orleans, I needed a deeper connection to my experience. I shifted toward creative non-fiction and poetry, which I found in the work of James Baldwin, Toni

Morrison and the Surrealists. As I was writing each article I had a feeling in the back of my mind that it was for a larger project.

Each article was not just a news report, but an attempt to see what the central human conflicts were — the details that make it rise above that specific moment. I was driven to do that because I felt that in each specific protest march, or funeral, or relationship with someone, there were universal themes that were going through all of them.

Over the years, my essays became more personal and *The Independent* gave me space to develop. Of course they pay in hugs, not money, but I can't put a monetary value how they've allowed me to grow. It's priceless. If I had written for mainstream news or even a dogmatic political magazine, I would have been imprisoned in clichés.

**NN:** You start the book with a glimpse of your family history, which you return to often in the

**AFTER RETURNING FROM POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS, POWERS SHIFTED FROM WRITING ABOUT POLITICS THROUGH THE PRISM OF CULTURAL THEORY TO EXPLORING CREATIVE NON-FICTION AND POETRY. HE DREW ON THE WORK OF JAMES BALDWIN, TONI MORRISON AND THE SURREALISTS.**

more personal sections of the book. What did it feel like to juxtapose the intimacies of your family life with the major tragedies of the 21st century?

**NP:** Some of the fights and long-standing silences in the family are a product of class and racism that seeped into my family and warped our relationships, sometimes breaking them. Those family scenes in the book that are very intimate are scaled on the same ideas that affect the larger disasters that I experienced. The same racism that I saw play out in New Orleans or in Bed-Stuy is the same racism that I could see on the very head of my own mother — who for years fried her hair and was told by her mother that she was

not white enough.

**NN:** In the book, 9/11 provides the initial call to action for you to position yourself to shine a spotlight on tragedy. Why did 9/11 have this effect, when it could easily have caused you to shut down?

**NP:** 9/11 was the first time I experienced history in my face. I lived through all of the clichés, including washing my hair to get the smell of the Towers — which just saturated the air in the city for months — out of my dreads. So many things at that time changed the trajectory of my life — the anti-war protests, breaking up with my then-fiancé. Most of all, I felt like a failure because I never physically got a chance to help people at Ground Zero. When Hurricane Katrina came, I directed all of that pent-up energy towards New Orleans.

**NN:** In the book, after leaving New Orleans in the wake of Katrina

there's one point where you say that you "wanted to be free of caring for people [that you] could not help." Can you explain what this feels like? After experiencing this, why continue to go back?

**NP:** I thought I was going to be this big fucking super hero — I went there and I accomplished nothing. Coming back in shame, I aimed to write the most beautiful, poetic, honest stuff I could to get people's attention, but hardly anyone read it. I just got really angry at the world. I was isolated and ashamed, and that's what it actually felt like.

**NN:** Do you feel that you have a bit of a "white" or "Western savior complex?"

**NP:** Well, I did listen to a lot of U2 growing up. It's a white savior complex, but in my case, maybe it's more of a mestizo savior complex? It wasn't like I was trying to save the "Other." I was the "Other" and I was reliving the tragedy of my mother's life. I was trying to bear witness to the racism that she dealt with and tried to stop it from hurting other people.

**NN:** Your visits to the annual Burning Man festival are a big part of the healing process for you. Do you feel that attending Burning Man has changed your views on spirituality? Or on reality?

**NP:** I was raised Catholic and became an atheist. I think Catholicism has made more atheists than World War Two. But being an atheist is very lonely. After I studied evolution, god vanished. There was nothing in the sky. I had no one to talk to. There was nowhere to find meaning in my life and the world became very cold. Atheism was like the great nothing in the never-ending story, it just destroyed everything but it was a necessary clearing.

When I went to Burning Man and I was on LSD and ecstasy, candy flipping, I began to feel like I was creating my own sense of spirituality. When I went into the desert and I looked up, I saw countless stars and realized just how big and far away everything is. I suddenly began to feel that atheism wasn't a great nothing, and that I could build something. I felt the sacredness of life, exactly because there's nothing after it.

**NN:** You consistently express your exasperation over the ineffectiveness of rallies, protests, journalism and relief efforts. If not these things, how is the reader of *The Ground Below Zero* meant to respond? What do you feel is the proper response to tragedy?

**NP:** I think we have to save lives in the moment and change the system over time. And the rallies and

marches are necessary for people to meet and see each other. So is theory but theory is not, on its own, sufficient. And it can blind us to reality.

When I came back from Haiti, my friends on the Left wanted a vision of it based on leftist ideology. Of course in Haiti I did see people who were suffering and trying to defend themselves, but I also saw people stealing things that they didn't need. What I knew before and realized again is that "The People" are a spectrum of personalities but when you report on that ideologues will accuse you of being naïve or stupid.

For them, there is a central thesis that demands certain kinds of images to prove itself, and those images do exist in reality, but so do a lot of other images. If you're an honest person or a good reporter, you're going to report on all of the things that the central thesis doesn't want to acknowledge. In literary theory that's called deconstruction, but I think it's just called telling the truth. I think this makes me a good writer but maybe also an awkward Leftist, and that's okay.

*Nicholas Powers is an associate professor of English Literature at SUNY-Old Westbury. He is the author of Theater of War and Ground Below Zero (UpSet Press, 2013).*

*Nia Nottage is a collaborative artist who studies music and poetry at Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts. Her tumber is [whatispurpose.tumblr.com](http://whatispurpose.tumblr.com).*

### INDY AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

In next month's paper longtime *Independent* writer Steven Wishnia talks with Adam Johnson about his second novel, *When the Drumming Stops*. He also reflects on the lost underground world of the Lower East Side and what it's like to go from playing in a popular punk rock band at the height of the Reagan era to eventually crashing against the realities of middle age and the Great Recession.



**THE SKY IS THE LIMIT:** Nicholas Powers, author of *The Ground Below Zero*, has been writing for *The Independent* since 2004. During the past decade he has reported from New Orleans, Darfur and Haiti, among other places.

TIMOTHY KRAUSE

THE INDEPENDENT November 1-3, 2013 23

# NO ONE OWNS THE INDYPENDENT

Unlike other publications, we don't rely on corporate sponsors or deep-pocketed millionaires. That's why we're able to be a fiercely independent newspaper that provides **original, on-the-ground reporting** and **sharp, incisive analysis** of social justice movements across New York City and around the world. We're also **expanding our coverage** of arts and culture, launching **special projects** like our whistleblower poster series and more.

**You make it possible.** We are only able to do this because of readers like you.

## Please give today!

We have big plans for 2014, but first we need to **raise \$15,000 in our annual fund drive** to continue going strong into the new year.

### Thank you for your support.

Return the form on this page or give online at [independent.org/donate](http://independent.org/donate).



Make a gift of \$35 or more and receive a copy of *The Ground Below Zero*, a new book from The Independent's own Nicholas Powers!

## YES! I WOULD LIKE TO DONATE

\$25  \$50  \$100  \$250  \$500  \$ \_\_\_\_\_

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY

STATE

ZIP

EMAIL

PHONE

**PAYMENT INFORMATION**  CHECK (payable to *The Independent*)  CREDIT CARD

NAME ON CARD

SIGNATURE

CARD NUMBER

EXPIRATION DATE

CVC

*The Independent* has grown into a newspaper with an utterly unique perspective ... reporting on the whole world as a collection of neighborhoods, all struggling for justice ...  
**Please join me in supporting *The Independent* in any way you can.**

NAOMI KLEIN



**MAIL TO:**  
THE INDYPENDENT  
P.O. BOX 1043  
NEW YORK, NY 10276

OR VISIT   
**INDYPENDENT.ORG/  
DONATE**