Imagining One D.C.: Using Feminist and Queer Theory as a basis to Combat Gentrification

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Abstract

Gentrification is a growing, urban phenomenon with specific implications for feminist and Queer theorists. Yet despite the overwhelming amount of women and queer communities driving anti-gentrification activism, the intersections of gentrification, feminism, and Queer theories remain understudied. In an effort to understand how feminist and Queer theories may inform or interact with anti-gentrification activism, I conducted a five-month-long, participatory research-based case-study of one organization in the District of Columbia: Organizing Neighborhood Equity (ONE) DC. Using materials and notes drawn from ONE DC’s online sources and meetings ONE DC, I argue that ONE DC roots itself within feminist and queer theories to develop successful strategies to fight against gentrification. By focusing on intersectional identities, avoiding hierarchies, and imagining a future outside of current power structures and ideals, ONE DC develops a concrete understanding of and concrete resistance strategies to gentrification, exemplifying potential resistance strategies against nebulous, interlocking oppressions.
**Introduction**

Since sociologist Ruth Glass (1964) first coined the term over 50 years ago, attention towards gentrification has exploded. While cities are inherently nebulous, affected by the ebb and flow of industry, investment, and disinvestment, the influx of new capital and new middle and upper-class residents are transforming cities from San Francisco to Seoul at a significant cost for long-term residents. However, there is no other space in America where the process of gentrification is more apparent than in Washington, D.C. Nestled between the North and South, the Capital historically provided a home to influential Black thinkers, activists, and artists who built their legacies from former slave and freedman societies (Asch & Musgrove, 2017). Eventually, the District’s prolific Black culture and, at one point, the majority-Black population lent it the nickname of “the Chocolate City.” However, as the number of Black residents dropped from 70 percent in 1970 to 48 percent in 2017 (D.C. Policy Center), it has become clear that D.C.’s competitive real-estate and job markets, problematic housing policies, and destructive development methods are rewriting the entire DNA of the District.

The boom of NGO’s, consulting, and government work in the 1990s following Congress’ return of governance to D.C., or home rule, drew new, young, and ethnically diverse populations into the city (Asch & Musgrove, 2017). With new capital, the D.C. government focused on revitalizing long-ignored, majority-black areas of the city like the Shaw and the H Street corridor by demolishing public housing in order to create new, mixed-income units. The results came at a high cost for long-term, working class, Black residents who were largely displaced by these new public housing revitalization projects. Despite having the strongest tenant protections in the country, reports by Georgetown University (2017) and the National Community Reinvestment
Coalition (2019) show landlords and developers are pushing out poor, black tenants while white, wealthy tenants are moving in. As a trade-off for increased wealth, gentrification is forcing D.C.’s Black residents farther out of the city—east of the Anacostia, past the most racially isolated, majority Black Wards 7 and 8 and towards Prince George’s County, Maryland (Georgetown University, 2017, 71).

The sour taste of gentrification is bubbling to the surface, appearing in articles about recent transplants disrespecting historically Black institutions. In April, neighbors in a new luxury condo temporarily shut up a MetroPCS store known for blasting Go-Go music, until Black residents campaigned in favor of the store (Kurzius, 2019). In May, Howard University students stormed an Advisory Neighborhood Council meeting in order to stop white neighbors from using their campus as a dog park (Simons, 2019). These articles highlight every day, racial tensions exacerbated by gentrification in the District, but also highlight the daily resistance long-time residents are conducting.

Gentrification and resistance are not distinct and isolated social phenomena developing independently from one another (Opillard, 2015). Yet, a majority of the literature has focused on one aspect without acknowledging the other. Even more problematically, both sides of the literature seem to ignore the many varying identities affected by and resisting gentrification, erasing the most marginalized in the process. Considering activism is inseparable from identity and lived experience, and that women and queer folks have historically placed themselves on the frontlines of fighting against gentrification (Curran, 2018), it is wholly reasonable to consider that this erasure has not only stunted the growth of gentrification academia, but of Queer and feminist academia.
In an effort to understand how feminist and Queer theories may inform or interact with anti-gentrification activism, I conducted a five-month-long, participatory research-based case-study of one organization in the District of Columbia: Organizing Neighborhood Equity (ONE) DC. Using materials and notes drawn from ONE DC’s online sources and meetings ONE DC, I argue that ONE DC roots itself within feminist and Queer theories to develop successful strategies to fight against gentrification. By focusing on intersectional identities, avoiding hierarchies, and imagining a future outside of current power structures and ideals, ONE DC develops a concrete understanding of and concrete resistance strategies to gentrification.

**Background**

*Gentrification: a Primer*

Debates on gentrification historically reproduced problematic narratives by focusing on whether gentrification was a result of the production of new urban spaces or increased demand for urban space, whether displacement truly occurred alongside gentrification, and whether displacement was in itself harmful to long-term residents (see Brown-Saracino 2010). However, since the 1980s, a more robust and intersectional understanding of gentrification and displacement as violent, traumatic, and affecting individual identities differently has emerged. While this scholarship includes many contesting definitions of gentrification, I expand on Sarah Schulman’s (2012) definition using works by Dr. Mindy Fullilove (2005), Manissa Maharawal (2017), and Neil Smith (1996). Schulman (2012, 14) defines gentrification as “a concrete replacement process. Physically, it is an urban phenomena: the removal of communities of diverse classes, ethnicities, races, sexualities, languages, and points of view from the central neighborhoods of cities, and their replacement by more homogenized groups.” This process is
inherently violent and traumatic—creating a scenario of what Fullilove called “root shock,” a “traumatic stress reaction related to the destruction of one's emotional ecosystem” (Fullilove, 2005, 11). As Fullilove (2005) argues, neighborhoods are the sum of their sounds, smells, noises, and the memories made within them. Gentrification uproots neighborhoods and cities, disconnecting the displaced residents from home in order to generate real estate capital. Because many aspects of this uprooting process are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify, data-driven methods may mischaracterize or obscure gentrification’s harm.

Additional scholarship has mischaracterized gentrification as limited to one city or neighborhood, rather than as a nebulous process. The effects of gentrification do not just seep from one community to the next, rather, they essentially involve surrounding communities (Maharawal 2017). Increased investment into one street inevitably draws investment into the streets around it. As street after street and neighborhood after neighborhood is gentrified, displaced residents are forced farther and farther out in search of affordable housing. As Maharawl (2017) noted in her study on the California Bay Area, evictions and displacement in San Francisco ultimately transformed the entire Bay Area’s demographics; the whitening of San Francisco and Oakland coincided with the suburbanization of poverty as Black and Brown residents were forced farther inland. The same is true for D.C. The whitening of the Chocolate city has coincided with the suburbanization of poverty in Prince George’s County (Georgetown University 2017).

Gentrification centrally involves policies beyond just housing. Since the 1970s, economic restructuring focused on austerity—service cuts, unemployment, and dismantling welfare—created the conditions which made today’s intense gentrification possible (Smith 1996,
3). Capitalism inherently needs to accumulate revenue; stability is synonymous with growth in the capitalist system. When rates begin to fall in one arena, financial capital looks towards other arenas to generate revenue. Simply put, capitalism relies on uneven development. As Smith (1996) argues, cities, which primarily housed the working class and people of color, were both implicitly and explicitly ignored while developers focused on the suburbs. As profits in the suburbs waned, developers turned towards the city, reinvesting to draw in wealthy, suburban clientele. Gentrification is a larger part of an economic restructuring that overwhelmingly targets the American working class, allowing developers to absorb neighborhoods piece by piece (Smith 1996). It is not just the leading edge of the process of uneven development, but part and parcel of American capitalism. To this day, city investments and speculation go hand-in-hand with displacement, dispossession, privatization of the commons, and police violence heavily inscribed by social class (Smith 1979; 1996; 2002). While geographical patterns of displacement depend upon the social and economic contexts of the time period in which they occur, today’s displacement was “created through the simultaneous development of the suburbs and inner-city underdevelopment” (Smith 1996, 83). Across America, urban real estate markets are mopping up international capital and surplus value to profit from the inner city, ultimately driven by their need to accumulate revenue and the low-risk of investing in inner city property. These real estate markets cater to wealthier inhabitants by forsaking poorer inhabitants, essentially colonizing the urban space (Lees et. al 2015).

In America, where capitalism is guided by and pursues racial directions, policies that criminalize and micro-regulate Black and Brown bodies and spaces also contribute to gentrification. These spaces are coded as “ghetto,” and their residents coded as “gangsters” or
“superpredators,” who threaten “public safety” (Wilson & Grammenos 2005; Chaskin & Joseph 2015; Pattillo, 2007). In one Chicago-based gentrification study, for example, Chaskin and Joseph (2015) found redevelopment exacerbates pre-existing racial and class stigmas. In gentrifying Chicago neighborhoods, gentrifiers view Black or Brown bodies as indications of drug or other criminal activity. This stigmatization leads to the arrests of the youth of color as young as 10 or 11 (Chaskin & Joseph 2015). Such stigmatization can be observed in D.C., where a majority of the people arrested, subjected to stop-and-frisks, and pulled over by D.C. police were Black (ACLU 2019). Despite making up just under 50% of D.C.’s population, from 2013 to 2017, 86% of people arrested by the D.C. police were black (ACLU 2019). Notably, although marijuana is legal in D.C. and white and Black residents use marijuana at the same rates, Black residents made up 80 percent of D.C. police public use arrests (ACLU 2019).

Gentrifying real estate firms equate whiteness to safety, and thereby equate whiteness to marketability and benefit. The process of surveillance, monitoring, and over-policing of the resident communities of color ultimately secures the development firms’ desired whiteness (Shaw, 2007). Upper class, white landowners and developers benefit from this micro-regulation and criminalization, buying up properties at discounted rates to remodel, resell, and market to young, white gentrifiers. State policymakers promote these racially transcribed practices due to the selling off and redevelopment of social housing through programs like HOPE VI, a federal housing program that led to a net loss of low-income housing units by encouraging their demolition, instead of renovation and investment of low-income communities (Koning 2015; Asch & Musgrove 2017, 126). Thus, gentrification must be contextualized within the larger
history of discrimination and the unfolding racial and class hierarchies within the time-space context of an urban area.

_Gender and gentrification_

Despite the renewed attention towards racial and class differences, mainstream gentrification literature still widely ignores the issue of gender and sexuality. The most comprehensive review on the subject was released in 2018, by Winifred Curran, titled “Gender and Gentrification.” As Curran (2018) argues, any understanding of gentrification that fails to recognize gender obfuscates the process and on-the-ground effects of gentrification. Although “gender is not necessarily central to the definition of gentrification, [it] has been central to gentrifications effects in a patriarchal, heternormative system” (Curran 2018, 2). Gender is inescapable as it informs and organizes all aspects of our lives, and urbanization and urban planning are not exempt. Rather, the constitution of urban environments and gender are historically linked; periods of industrialization coincided with periods of gender role transition, and periods of suburbanization coincided with the reinforcement of traditional gender roles—all constructed within the male-dominated, heterosexually oriented methods of social, political, and economic organization that American society rests upon (Mackenzie 1988). Therefore, the lack of attention towards gender is not only an oversight but a dangerous misinterpretation of gentrification itself.

As Curran (2018) recognized, this was not always the case. Before scholars even associated gentrification with displacement, early debates centered on gender, arguing that gentrification could potentially disrupt patriarchal structures and held emancipatory potential for women and queer folks (Caulfield 1989; Damaris 1984). In periods of urban transition, the
community, connectivity, and centrality of the city provided women and other marginalized groups space to explore and challenge gender binaries, improving urban life in the process. However, the supposed benefits did not outweigh gentrifications practical, high cost (Curran 2018). Any potential benefits were largely relegated to upper or middle class, white, gender-conforming individuals. In practice, gentrification largely solidified patriarchal assumptions about caregiving, travel, meal preparation, and urban organization. It has ultimately upheld patriarchal family and land-use practices and thwarted the potential of truly liberatory progress (Curran 2018).

Current housing, development, policing, labor, and care policies associated with gentrification entrench gendered stereotypes and gendered divisions of labor, challenging Queer and feminist constructions of the city. As noted by both Curran (2018) and Tickell and Peck (1996), development plans are dominated by white men with overwhelmingly masculinist, business-oriented growth agendas. This agenda guides housing and labor policy, leading to policies that favor single, young, urban professionals uninterested in child-bearing at the cost of families and communities. While women have their own concerns regarding access, safety, and design, urban planning departments not only rely on male conceptions of households, space, and place but reductionist ideas of women (Greed 2006). Despite the racial, class, and sexual differences between women, city officials who incorporate gender sensitive planning do so by reducing women to a unified group. In addition, city planners have long ignored women’s reproductive labor—unpaid house work, neighborhood work, and care work that enables much of the economy (Rakodi & Rakodi 1991). City planners have also ignored the specific cultural differences between heteronormative and queer populations. As SAGE (2012) reports, urban
designers have long ignored the social and legal stigmatization, reliance on informal family structures, and current legal inequities LGBTQ populations, especially elderly LGBTQ populations, face. The resulting absence of adequate child and elderly care facilities, public schools, family-focused and chosen family-friendly housing, and gender sensitive transportation and zoning disproportionately affects working class women and queer folks.

This lack of attention towards gender and sexuality is especially problematic considering women and queer folks make up the most disadvantaged populations of already disadvantaged communities and are thus more vulnerable to displacement (Jupp 2014; Rose 1984; Curran 2018). In the United States, welfare users, social-housing occupants, low-wage earners, and single parents are disproportionately women. Elderly populations, who are overwhelmingly reliant on fixed incomes and thereby vulnerable to displacement, are also disproportionately women (Bondi 1991). Queer folks, especially trans and non-binary people of color, are more likely to experience poverty, police violence, and displacement, which gentrification intensifies (Curran 2018; Rahder & McLean 2013).

Just as some women may benefit from gentrification based on their racial or class privileges, some LGBTQ populations benefit from gentrification at the cost of others. As Nast (2002, 880) stated in his analysis of gay neighborhoods, certain gay populations—namely economically privileged, mostly white, gay men—have the means to “consolidate and shore up previous rounds of patriarchal white privilege accumulations.” Restrictive representations of queerness, which focus on white, gay men, effect who is seen as desireable and who ultimately benefits in city planning—those most able to conform to dominant gender and sexuality norms. This is seen clearly in the gentrified boroughs of Bushwick and Brooklyn, New York. Once
neighborhoods with diverse queer populations, cheap rents and real estate speculation are turning Bushwick and Brooklyn into unaffordable spaces for long-time residents. This rapid gentrification coincided with a high concentration of wrongful arrests of trans women in those spaces, indicating “that the purpose of these arrests is to make the women leave, thus clearing the way for even more intensive gentrification” (Curran 2018, 84, citing Bellafante 2016). Through the enforcement of obscure and vague loitering laws, New York police asserted that Brooklyn and Bushwick were no longer safe spaces for trans women. In cities around the world, neighborhoods once considered safe for those on the margins of society are transforming into over-policed, spaces of harassment. In turn, gentrifiers take over these spaces and erase or co-opt these histories. Through this process, the state, real estate companies, and gentrifiers let the populations who carved that space know they are no longer welcome.

On the frontlines: resisting displacement

When scholars do look at women and queer folks, it is often as gentrifiers, not as the displaced. Leslie Kern (2010, 2013), for example, wrote multiple studies on gender and sexuality in relation to gentrification in Toronto. Like other scholars in the 1980s and early 2010s interested in gender and gentrification, Kern primarily focused on the complex roles primarily white women and queer folks have in relation to the neighborhoods they gentrify. While this work is important, focusing only on women and queer folks as gentrifiers erase the experiences and struggles of women and queer folks as displaced communities. This overwhelming lack of attention is especially alarming for feminist theorists when considering who is normally on the front lines of anti-gentrification activism: women and queer folks.
While white men have dominated urban planning, women and queer folks historically have dominated urban resistance. Patriarchal constructions of gender largely relegated women to the domestic sphere, delegating women with the responsibility of community building (Hooks, 1990; Federici 2019). Homemaking and community building involves creating social commitments and spatial attachments, which in themselves hold revolutionary potential. As Zenzele Iseke’s (2013) analysis of Black, female activists in Newark shows, women regularly transform oppressive structures through creative, confrontational community work. They build off of lived histories of resistance in order to transform the political and cultural meanings of abandoned and neglected spaces, thereby uplifting, revitalizing, and transforming the city. As both Iseke (2013) and Sylvia Federici (2019, 715) argue, women “[produce] a new social reality” in the margins of cities through this transformative process. As a result, they “not only [guarantee] the survival of populations that capitalism has largely excluded from its development plans, but [enable] new forms of resistance and confrontation with the state” (Federici 2019, 715). Long ignored by masculinist and heterosexual-oriented, individualist city planning policies, working-class, women of color are creating new communal-means of existence.

As Curran (2018) and Ghaziani (2014) show, Iseke and Federici’s arguments easily extend to queer folks. Historically excluded from city-planning, queer folks built alternative social spaces, commitments, and attachments born from their marginalization. From New York’s West Village to San Francisco’s Haight, gay neighborhoods, or “gayboorhoods,” provide sexual and gender minorities with safe spaces in an often unsafe environment (Curran, 2018, Ghaziani 2014). As Ghaziani (2014, 3) writes, “Gayborhoods are more than just a protective shield. They also provide a platform from which gays and lesbians can organize themselves as a voting bloc.
… or as a social movement … gayborhoods represent a space of freedom in which gays and lesbians can discover the authenticity of who they are and celebrate it without being burdened by the tyranny of the closet or the culturally crushing weight of heteronormativity.” This imaginative and exploratory process of sculpting new meanings from traditionally exclusionary spaces is in itself a form of resistance—resistance intensely aware of the diverse positionalities within patriarchal, racial capitalism.

Despite these rich histories, feminist and Queer activism against gentrification remains severely understudied. Ultimately, this virtual absence of attention towards examining gentrification activism from an explicitly Queer and feminist lens subtracts from both our understanding of gentrification and our understanding of how to mitigate it. At a time when so many cities are plagued by unaffordability, this is a dire issue. It is more important now than ever to expand our focus and question both what we know and what we do not know so we can better defend against marginalization and displacement. Successfully doing so requires academia to orient itself towards the marginalized—towards an explicitly feminist and Queer understanding of resistance.

**Methods**

This project attempts to fix a large gap within gentrification literature by focusing on how feminist and queer theories inform anti-gentrification activism. By feminist, I mean both actions focused on ending sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression as well as the broader theoretical work focused on exploring, contesting, and problematizing gender from an intersectional perspective (hooks, 1990). While feminist movements may be focused on women, activism can be feminist without focusing on women explicitly. By focusing on multiple intersecting
structures of domination, radically confronting oppressive systems, and building coalitions, activism may, in fact, be inherently feminist. By Queer, I refer to the theoretical, not identitarian, term. Following Naisragi Dave (2012, 7-8), I define queer as the creative, practical struggle against the drive of normalization; the imaginative and liberatory labor of inventing heretofore unimaginable possibilities; and a struggle rooted within creative relational ethics.

In order to understand how anti-gentrification activism could be feminist or Queer, I focused on ONE DC, a local anti-gentrification group founded in 2006. I chose ONE DC because of the organization’s explicit focus on Black feminist leaders like Assata Shakur and Ella Jo Baker as well as its central location within the Shaw, one of the more rapidly gentrifying areas of D.C. As gentrification is a global issue, this study has implications beyond D.C. and for both researchers and activists across the globe. Furthermore, by focusing on resistance, I hope to address deeper questions within feminist and Queer research—namely, what does feminist resistance look like, and what does Queer resistance look like?

To conduct my research, I utilized online resources on ONE DC’s website and attended a bi-weekly ONE DC meetings from November 2019 to March of 2020. The meetings I attended primarily revolved around ONE DC’s Right To Housing (R2H) committee, a member-based committee focusing on outreach, research, and organizing against the displacement of DC’s working-class, long-term, Black residents. Prior to attending these meetings, I attended an introductory meeting for new members. At ONE DC meetings, members handed out informational flyers and packets, discussed the history and goals of ONE DC, and discussed problems with organizing. I incorporate these fliers, packets, discussions, and comments into my research. At the meetings, I conducted participatory research, involving myself with the political
action side of ONE DC’s Right to Housing committee. In practice, this meant contributing to the organization’s political research, such as researching landlords and policies, and providing support when needed, such as child care. ONE DC was aware I was conducting research, and I obtained the organization’s consent before beginning my thesis.

In total, I interacted with around 30 members and volunteers at meetings. In order to maintain their anonymity, I refer to them by initials when quoted or referenced. In contrast, I refer to online and reading materials are referenced to by the phrase “ONE DC,” referring to the organization as a collective whole. I collected these materials for reference in an appendix. Since members introduced themselves at each meeting and discussed personal lives, I was able to garner that ONE DC had a diverse membership. ONE DC members ranged from 18 to 70-years-old and came from different professional backgrounds—ranging from retail workers, activists, lawyers, professors, servers, to bartenders. While sexuality and gender identity rarely came up, pronoun introductions and personal discussions showed ONE DC Membership included trans individuals, non-binary people, and a diverse range of sexualities. Additionally, there was a diverse range of familiarity with ONE DC itself; some members had worked at ONE DC for more than 10 years, while others had just joined two months ago. While the organization was majority-Black, people from all racial backgrounds were present—including white, latinx, and asian members.

Still, researching gentrification made me intensely aware that despite living in D.C. for four years, I knew very little about its current and past history. As a middle-class, white student and transplant in one of the richer neighborhoods in Northwest D.C., my connection with ONE DC was itself tenuous. While I had personal experiences with gentrification in the Bay Area, it
became intensely clear that I knew very little about the conditions and struggles of long-term residents facing gentrification. While I invested time to get to familiarize myself with the conditions and struggles of D.C. residents, I, to quote Kern (2013), cannot “necessarily alleviate Slater’s (2006) concern that gentrification researchers slide too easily into the role of ‘latté urbanists’, rather than urban activists.” Like Kern (2013), I also do not know if I can “truly escape this charge,” but I believe that gentrification resistance work demands careful attention from the academic field.

An Overview of ONE DC

ONE DC was founded in 2006 as a way to combat the displacement of DC’s long-term, working-class, Black residents. It branched off of MANNA CDC, which focused on buying, developing, and selling houses for low-income residents. In contrast to its mother organization, ONE DC is focused on, to quote A, “empowering communities.” Their mission is to “exercise political strength to create and preserve racial and economic equity in Shaw and the District. [They] seek to create a community in D.C. that is equitable for all,” specifically fighting against income and housing insecurity for D.C. residents (see Fig. 1b). ONE DC argues that the city has “successfully encouraged wealthier and whiter residents to move into the city.” In the process, DC “destroyed welfare and social programs, attacked workers’ rights and supported a severe reduction in spending on programs for the most vulnerable. The beneficiaries of this policy are the wealthy” (see Fig. 1b). In order to fight against this process, ONE DC insists on shifting activism towards the most disadvantaged members of D.C., or D.C.’s long-term, working-class, Black residents.
As emphasized by B in the introductory meeting, ONE DC focuses on “building leaders through grassroots organizing” and creating durable strategies and visions for liberation from the specific vision of its target population. ONE DC hopes to “build sustainable, collective power through the determination of collective action” by focusing on their needs. In practice, this means that ONE DC directly opposes the interests of landlords, housing development agencies, and, as B stated, “capitalist policies.” Adopting a Marxist, community-consensus approach towards organizing, ONE DC argues “our community should be the source of power.”

Black and Indigenous organizers inspire ONE DC’s values with an explicit focus on, as paraphrased by E, women and men of color whose revolutionary work remains overshadowed or ignored by larger activist communities. ONE DC explicitly references activists like Ella Jo Baker, Mother Jones, Standing Bear, Ida B. Wells, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Claudia Jones in their guiding values (see Fig.1.a). ONE DC specifically values access to education, housing, work, and living wages; international solidarity; and returning stewardship of the lands to Indigenous communities, among other ideals (see Fig.1.b).

A typical meeting will start with introductions, pronouns, and “how you will show out,” or how you will contribute to ONE DC. Afterward, the group moves into business, updates, and then may split up into working groups. In the R2H Committee, there are three working groups: the Political Action subcommittee, which focuses on researching the political, economic, and social factors contributing to displacement; the Neighborhood Defense subcommittee, which comes up with alternatives to racial capitalism; and the Outreach subcommittee, which canvasses and establishes relationships with long-term, working class, Black D.C. residents. After about 45 minutes, groups reconvene and give a brief overview of what they accomplished and what they
still need to do. At the end of each meeting, members will volunteer for roles for the next
meeting—facilitator, note-taker, timekeeper, and stack-keeper, who keeps track of questions.

While conducting my research, ONE DC was in the middle of planning its People’s
Movement Assembly, or PMA. The PMA is a gathering of people to make decisions for
collective action and power, focused on dismantling colonial, neocolonial, and neoliberal
systems and imagining a new social and economic system for DC residents. In order to create
that space, ONE DC aimed to get around 25,000 DC residents to show out to the event by
solidifying alliances with similarly-oriented organizations, including the Pan-African
Community Action (PACA) group. While a little under 100 people showed up, the PMA
presented an amazing opportunity to see ONE DC organization outside of the small office the
group had been meeting in and in action.

**ONE DC: Defining Feminist, Queer Activism Against Gentrification**

After spending five months with the organization, it became apparent through the
organization’s structure, materials, and meetings that ONE DC is rooted within and influenced
by multiple modes of feminist and Queer activism and theories. Despite the lack of explicit
mission-attention towards women and queer people, the organizing was undoubtedly feminist
and undoubtedly Queer. However, trying to define specifically how ONE DC was feminist and
queer was challenging as the theories and practices informing activism are often intertwined and
difficult to unravel. However, three theories repeatedly asserted themselves as dominant
influences to ONE DC’s structure, mission, and movement across each meeting, interaction, and
material I observed: intersectionality, assemblage, and “Queering” the future.
Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality not only describes how race, class, gender and other identities intersect with one another, but it also presents guidelines for organizing against oppression. By bringing the most oppressed voices to the forefront and focusing on their own unique experiences existing within multiple intersections of oppression, activist organizations can create a more just system for all. ONE DC embodies both aspects of intersectionality. ONE DC is explicitly aware of and attentive towards considerations of how race, class, gender, and sexuality impact D.C. residents. This is evident in the organizations reading list and through research done by ONE DC’s R2H Political Action Subcommittee.

ONE DC’s aims to educate on not only gender, sexuality, class, and housing within a capitalist system, but the intersections of each by disseminating literature from diverse, oftentimes ignored voices. Their materials focus on explicitly Marxist, de-colonial, Black-feminist perspectives. In order to facilitate this knowledge-building, ONE DC maintains their own donation-based library, open to the community. Materials range from historical novels to poetry to manifestos. An in-exhaustive list of authors includes Elizabeth Hinton; Audre Lorde; Kwame Nkurumah; Barbara Ransby; Angela Davis; James Baldwin; Franz Fanon; and Karl Marx. These particular figures have written about anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-patriarchal constructions of identity, community, labor, and activism. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the authors or autobiographies on ONE DC’s reading list (see Fig. 3) are Black.

During the member orientation meeting, the discussion leader, B, explicitly referenced Ella Jo Baker and the Combahee River Collective statement as having written defining,
introductory literature to anti-gentrification activism. Baker was a civil rights activist and founding member of the Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who historians have traditionally overlooked in comparison to more famous figures like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., as B mentioned. As noted by Ula Taylor (1998), Baker largely struggled with both the sexism her male counterparts subjected her to and the racism white feminists subjected her to. Like Baker, other Black women activists at the time were relatively upset with the dual discriminations they faced. And, in 1977, a group of Black women feminists released a statement outlining their frustrations and outlining a way forward. They argued that Black women face a range of oppressions which neither Black men nor white women share, and cautioned against false ideals of brotherhood and sisterhood and explicitly asked their colleagues to focus their revolution on Black women. If Black women are free, everyone else would have to be free, since Black women’s freedom necessitates the destruction of all oppressive systems. The Combahee River Collective (1977) statement is widely cited within feminist history, and it stands out as a defining moment in the development of identity politics and intersectional theory.

ONE DC also incorporates intersectionality by bringing the voices of those most affected by gentrification in D.C. through their language and organization structure. In every meeting, facilitators identified the target group not as “D.C. residents” plainly, but as “working-class, long-term, Black D.C. residents.” This deliberate language emphasizes the population most affected by D.C. housing policies and reminds members to be particularly attentive to both their own positionality and their own research—orienting questions of help and harm towards that community in particular. While ONE DC is not explicitly focused on how gentrification harms women and queer communities, this does not mean they avoid them altogether. Rather, their
organization is structured in a way that inherently focuses on women. ONE DC’s Board of Directors consists exclusively of Black women, a “deliberate move” according to B. By focusing on those who are the least respected in housing organizing but most affected by gentrification and displacement, ONE DC remains centered on the voices of the most marginalized, uplifting everyone in the process. These board members come from a variety of backgrounds—board members include a professor, a political economist, and K-12 teachers— but share their racial identity in common. Even without a hierarchical structure, meetings made it clear that board members were highly trusted and respected specifically for their background and experience.

In one research meeting, one of the board members, E, sat down with the Political Action Subcommittee in order to check in on progress. While going over questions, E frequently clarified and problematized questions about affordable housing in D.C., dissecting the different ways affordable housing policies are defined and how these definitions affect different groups. While dissecting a specific question on median area income’s effects on affordable housing, E brought up that the group “[needed] to get numbers on tiers of affordability, 0-30, 30-50 [percent],” pointing out that “when low-income focuses on 80 percent,” that is unhelpful for the majority of Black workers in D.C., who can only afford housing costs that are 0-30 percent of their income. In another question regarding single-family affordable housing units, E pointed out that the numbers, taken from the D.C. government, appeared wrong, referencing some of the conversations she has had with Black mothers. “one of the arguments Black women make,” E stated, “is that DC doesn’t build apartments for families.” E’s commentary invited the group to question both the information given to them by D.C. policy sites and further breakdown specific categorizations of people. E encouraged the group to look into the fundamental complexities and
conflicts characterizing the language in D.C. policy and how that simplified the different classes, races, and genders living in D.C—focusing on the intersections of identity.

“Intersectional activism” is not just about an organization’s language or structure; rather, it is an active, aware, and everyday practice. With a diverse membership that includes white and upper/middle class members, bringing in and focusing on ONE DC’s target audience is impossible without deliberately including intersectionality. By the beginning of March, ONE DC had an influx of new and returning members attending meetings. ONE DC leadership decided to separate the second March meeting into two groups. The first group consisted of ONE DC’s target membership and the second group of ONE DC’s socioeconomically and racially advantaged members, or, as R put it “frankly speaking, Black folks and white folks.” The second group, led by two long-time volunteers, focused on unraveling and confronting their privileges and positions within ONE DC. The first group continued to plan future actions and discuss what they wanted to see ONE DC do. This separation created a safe space for Black members to discuss their lived realities without the subconscious self-policing that may occur with white members present. Furthermore, it asserted their place at the forefront of ONE DC’s activism. Doing so also asserted white members positions as allies, not as ONE DC’s main focus.

As Crenshaw (1989) has emphasized, intersectionality requires more than just recognizing how oppressions interlock. Taking an intersectional approach to activism means efforts to combat one issue must actively combat other issues within the organizing space. For ONE DC, it’s not just enough to look at Black, working class D.C. residents' lack of housing as a racial or class issue. Rather, it is also an issue related to gender and sexuality. Additionally, it means recognizing that activist spaces can and often do reproduce these divisions. Intersectional
organizing therefore focuses on and brings the voices of the most oppressed to the forefront not only in the structure of the organization, but in every meeting and event.

Assemblage

In activism, assemblage refers to the loose gathering of people. Assemblage theory considers the agency of activist groups as “the result of webs of association” (Michael, 2000). Each link within the web has a specific goal and background, and the links loosely associate in order to develop new policy, pressure leadership, provide goods, and create change. Following a looser organizational structure provides significant opportunities for organization and community building. Following a loose format allows people to join in at any time, second, it recognizes that activism relies on the strength of the whole, rather than the individual. It also recognizes that each link within the web provides their own perspective which strengthens the web as a whole. As evident in ONE DC’s structure, following a loose, assemblage-style association allows activists to create partnerships, strengthen their community, and better tackle overwhelming and often ill-understood issues like gentrification.

ONE DC follows a loose structure (see Fig. 2) consisting of a shared leadership team with staff, board members, and apprentices; an executive committee, which provides guidance to the other branches of ONE DC; and volunteers who actively participate in ONE DC’s planning and processes. ONE DC repeatedly emphasized that guidance is not equal to domination. They follow a non-hierarchical leadership structure, roughly divided into four branches which oftentimes overlap and fluctuate: administrative and organization management, resource development, and organizing and member development. Administrative and organizing management includes communication, hiring, personnel, and legal. Resource development
includes grant writing, donor and funder relations, and grassroots fundraising. Organizing and Member development includes campaigns dedicated to empowering workers, including the People’s Platform, Right to Housing, community learning sessions like Learning Circles and Leadership Education Action and Power (LEAP), and the Black Workers and Wellness Center. Many of these sessions and groups rely on specific leaders and point people, who are picked as C stated because they are “reliably and consistently involved” and can, therefore, “make sure people know what they’re doing.”

Board members are heavily involved with the planning and execution of ONE DC events. At meetings, they offer both advice and guiding questions to groups and serve as a guiding point for the organization. Members clearly rely on their expertise within research fields, however, board members encourage others to rely on their own experiences. Members are also incredibly comfortable criticizing the board. In one exchange, a long-time member, C, jokingly pointed out that a board member’s, E, academic-oriented guiding questions and language were inaccessible to ONE DC’s target population. C simplified the questions the Political Action Committee researched to “Why [D.C.] is f*cked up, who keeps it f*cked up, and who are the major players.” Members laughed but understood that the point was to, as E stated, “meld the [academic language] with accessible language” in order to better relay ONE DC’s message. The exchange demonstrated not only that membership generally felt comfortable questioning the board but seemed to even keep the board in check with the larger goals of the organization.

The non-hierarchical organization has certain benefits, like facilitating conversation, encouraging active listening, and discouraging paternalism. While all aspects work in conjunction, it is this last aspect that is particularly important. As Chandra Mohanty (2003)
argued, feminism and activism more broadly have a tendency to fall into paternalistic modes. While Mohanty was specifically arguing from the perspective of the “Third World Woman,” examining how white, western feminists developed white savior complexes, the problem is not limited to this field. ONE DC is adamant about avoiding paternalism, as J repeatedly emphasized. Rather than speaking for and over others, members speak for their own identities and look towards other members or other organizations if they cannot. The goal is never to speak for D.C.’s Black, working-class, but to give them the tools and platform to speak for themselves.

However, this loose structure also comes with drawbacks. At meetings, members expressed exasperation because certain tasks were not accomplished on time. One group’s inability to meet a deadline inevitably affected the process of the whole group, which was remedied by increasing meetings or doing outside work. For example, the first meeting I attended on the R2H, the Political Action Subcommittee loosely divided a more than 40 question worksheet among four people. By the time the next meeting rolled around, less than half were answered. The Outreach Subcommittee and Neighborhood Defense Subcommittee expressed frustration because they needed the questions in order to fully complete their tasks. In the next meeting, the Political Action Committee remedied this by having the team pick ten questions each based on their own area of expertise. By the next meeting, a majority of the questions were answered. While the loose structure enables more people to join, it also may prevent certain necessary steps from getting done on time. As a result, ONE DC sometimes has to push back goals, events, and deadlines.

In order to alleviate this issue, ONE DC often turns to local resources and organizations. ONE DC’s specific vision, oriented towards the Black, long-term, working class D.C. residents
inevitably means that it attracts a certain person and type of expertise. In order to more effectively create change, the organization frequently works with other anti-gentrification organizations, local policy institutes, and academics for information and membership outreach. At the membership interest meeting, ONE DC handed out flyers for a local Latinx-focused anti-gentrification organization and also discussed previous coalition work with the DYKE March. In R2H meetings, members encouraged each other to reach out to policy experts like the DC Fiscal Policy Institute and University Sociology Professors to answer difficult-to-find questions about lobbying and housing policy.

As shown at the PMA, this coalition building is an important tactic and necessarily involves building relationships. At the PMA, several other racial-justice, anti-capitalist oriented organizations spoke (see Fig 5). Instead of forcing members and volunteers to take on more work and more research for topics they may not have expertise in, ONE DC relied on the expertise of other organizations. Throughout the PMA, ONE DC allotted time for community policing, housing co-operative organizations, and prison abolition organizations to speak. Aside from giving a brief description of their organizations and goals, the presenters discussed how each issue their organizations worked against—predatory and racialized policing, an unfair housing market, and mass incarceration—related to gentrification. Presentation length ranged from five minutes to forty-five minutes, with the longest presentation focused on community land trusts and housing cooperatives. Alongside ONE DC members, a member of a D.C. cooperative organization explained how cooperatives were feasible alternatives to D.C.’s current rental and housing market. In subsequent discussions and meetings, PMA attendees applied what they learned from the presentation and discussed what alternatives they liked most. Enabled by new
or better understandings, members identified sites for action, discussed the next steps, and what creating neighborhoods that care meant.

This process was enabled through assemblage. ONE DC not only relied on each members’ individual talents and interests but on D.C.’s large web of similarly-oriented activist groups. While these groups have different focuses, they are united in ending racial oppression, and therefore allies to ONE DC’s specific mission. The process of coming together at the PMA overall contributed to a greater understanding of gentrification in D.C. and the next steps ONE DC had to take in order to combat that gentrification. Furthermore, relying on outside expertise likely saved ONE DC from pushing the PMA back due to research and member limitations and strengthened the relationship between ONE DC and its allies. This practice of assemblage effectively strengthened ONE DC’s web, and in turn, increased its ability to effectively organize while avoiding paternalistic tendencies.

*Queering the Future: Imagining a D.C. Without Gentrification*

ONE DC focuses heavily on alleviating the hardships D.C.’s working-class, long-term, Black residents face. To do so, ONE DC also focuses on the creative, practical struggle against the normalization of poverty, gentrification, and austerity D.C. housing policies promotes, and it imagines and invents a D.C. without gentrification rooted within the creative and relational ethics of its membership and activism. The organization is specifically oriented towards long-term vision roughly defined as creating strategies for “liberation.” As evidenced by the R2H planning sessions for the PMA and the Neighborhood Defense Subcommittee, liberation itself is never defined as a concrete idea, rather it is roughly defined by what it is not—left open for
PMA attendees to imagine, create, and question notions of what is possible in D.C. In other words, ONE DC focuses on queering the reality and future of D.C.

To quote A, The PMA is a gathering of people to make decisions for collective action and power, by “answering what the problems we face are, what the solutions are, and what we are to do about them.” ONE DC fliers emphasized the PMA is a “decolonizing process… based on a theory of change that people can create processes that dismantle colonial, neocolonial, and neoliberal systems while at the same time creating a new society.” It creates an “open space for people to enter social movements and become active participants and leaders … and is facilitated to encourage maximum participation in order to practice direct participatory democracy.” In order to create that space, ONE DC solidified alliances with similarly-oriented organizations, like the anti-militarization and racial justice group PACA.

Within the PMA is the Neighborhood Defense Subcommittee. This subcommittee is explicitly focused on imagining a D.C. that is outside of liberal, capitalist, racist interpretations that currently define housing policies. While it is not responsible for defining what this explicitly means, it is responsible for researching an array of possible alternatives, such as housing cooperatives and identifying what political education is necessary to ensure productive participation for all members. While ONE DC heavily relies on its subcommittee members for the PMA planning process, the longstanding goal is to rely on the people—working-class, long-term, Black D.C. residents—to define what a non-gentrified D.C. looks like.

As ONE DC flyers (see Fig’s 4, 4a.) emphasized, the PMA reflects “the local leadership, culture, and practices of the participants and organizers” by creating “space for participants to think beyond the problem” and “generate ideas that are transformative and affect long-term
systematic change.” ONE DC wants to build activism that can transform the current lives of working-class, long-term, Black residents, but it does not want to limit this activism to what the current system deems is possible. “At the heart of the assembly,” according to a flyer (see fig4.a), “is a project to dismantle patriarchy, racism, poverty, capitalism, oppression, exploitation, and violence while replacing those systems with movement governance and liberated institutions.” In order to do so, it requires thinking, as stated, “beyond the problem” and transforming the city in the long-term. It is not enough to focus on just gentrification as gentrification essentially involves exploitation, racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and violence. In order to dismantle one oppressive process, you have to work towards dismantling all other processes.

At the PMA, ONE DC used small groups to effectively imagine new possibilities and potential future actions to combat D.C.’s current housing and rental market. From 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., attendees sat in small groups of up to eight people. Led by facilitators, they answered discussion questions that encouraged attendees to draw on their own identities, experiences, and emotions related to the presentation or activity on the agenda (see appendix, section 2). These questions were largely qualitative and exploratory, and included questions like “what made you the most angry” and “how can we take care of each other in our communities?” (see appendix, section 2). These broad questions gave attendees the chance to not only share similar experiences and hopes but explore how these experiences connected to gentrification. The simple questions also allowed attendees to creatively imagine what they wanted D.C. to look like and how they could help create that D.C. Facilitators jotted down and collected answers. At the end of each segment, facilitators shared what their groups answered with the PMA.
By the end of the meeting, the imaginative process led to the creation of a larger strategy document and concrete yet broad goals, such as “creating affordable housing,” “community control of vacant lands,” and “healthy accessible foods” for all, as PMA participants stated. The broad campaign goals were not “meant to be realistic” as both the flyer and members repeatedly emphasized, but were meant to guide ONE DC’s next steps. Follow-up meetings (see Fig. 6) would be focused on breaking down the broader goal into more feasible steps. The PMA was focused on challenging D.C. residents to articulate what their ideal D.C. looked like without any conventional limitations. This activity encouraged attendees to invent previously unimaginable possibilities, asking them to relate to and listen to other attendees’ experiences and perspectives through a process of creative imagination.

This activism represents not only a creative, practical struggle against the drive of normalization; imaginative and liberatory labor inventing heretofore unimaginable possibilities; and activism rooted within creative relational ethics. ONE DC rejects the current status quo of housing and welfare policies. ONE DC asks the communities most affected and most often ignored by these policies to imagine, in their own words, what the future they want looks like. ONE DC does so not only in opposition to classism, sexism, racism, and misogyny, but does so to create a world where these oppressions do not structure everyday life. ONE DC, in other words, is inherently oriented in Queer theory.

**Conclusion: ONE DC as a Model of Feminist, Queer Activism**

In an effort to understand how feminist and Queer theories may inform or interact with anti-gentrification activism, I conducted a six-week-long, participatory research-based case-study on ONE DC, a D.C. area anti-gentrification organization. Using materials and notes drawn from
fliers and interactions, I argued that ONE DC roots itself within feminist and Queer theories. I identified three primary theories ONE DC interacts with: intersectionality, assemblage, and Queer theory more broadly. First, ONE DC maintained an intersectional focus on gentrification by providing their membership with a diverse list of reading materials, focusing their leadership on those most affected by gentrification, Black women, and paying explicit attention to the ways various identities are affected by different policies. Second, ONE DC demonstrated how maintaining loose, non-hierarchical structures and building strong coalitions with similar interests but different identities, although imperfect, can produce more effective and less paternalistic activism. Finally, by imagining a future outside of current oppressive structures, rooted within the narrative of the oppressed, ONE DC exemplifies a Queer and liberatory organization that can better guide activists who wish to address interlocking, oppressive systems and processes like gentrification.

While divides between theories like intersectionality, assemblage, and Queer theory do exist, theoretical divides do not mean there is no interaction between theories whatsoever. Every theory has its limitations—limitations which activists and scholars alike inevitably confront. Choosing to incorporate multiple methods and modes of theory into your organizing or understanding can mitigate these limitations. Furthermore, academic tendencies to focus on one single theory or issue may oversimplify the reality of organizing against issues like gentrification. As ONE DC’s activism demonstrated, activists do not interact with just one theory in their struggle. Yet the tendency of many, especially within gentrification and urban planning literature, to ignore the complexities of everyday life and organizing has contributed to the strength and development of problematic narratives. This is not to say there are no benefits to
narrowing the theoretical scope of our research. Rather, when dealing with nebulous, interlocking oppressions, incorporating multiple theories illuminates our understanding of such issues. Flexibility within activism and academia is not a luxury but a necessity.

Ultimately, more research is needed on queer folks’ and womens’ experiences with gentrification, their role in resisting displacement, and the way Queer and feminist theories interact with this resistance. Future research must also include interviews; as feminist scholar Gayatri Spivak (2010) emphasized, western intellectuals’ habit of speaking for oppressed groups rather than listening to them re-asserts their subordordinate position. Whether this project fully escapes this charge is to be debatable. My research was limited by my own inability to conduct interviews—in part due to 2020’s pandemic— both with ONE DC and other D.C. organizations like the DYKE March. Including first person perspectives and understandings and focusing on interpreting and understanding activism, rather than falsely translating my observations into “truths,” may have mitigated some of the more problematic tendencies Spivak references. Additionally, while I described ONE DC’s intersection with Queer theory, this project failed to truly encapsulate and understand the specific strategies Queer identities and organizations use to fight gentrification. With the growing rate of gentrification across the world, however, there are plenty of opportunities to expand this research, including going beyond the borders of D.C. and towards the global.
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Appendix

Section 1: ONE DC fliers

Our Values

In the spirit of Ella Jo Baker, we value grassroots, democratic leadership.

In the spirit of Mother Jones, we value grassroots organizing and strategic hell-raising for justice.

In the spirit of Denmark Vesey we value sharing of power and resources for our collective liberation.

In the spirit of Standing Bear, we value people's right to indigenous culture and stewardship of land.

In the spirit of Ida B. Wells, we value organizing to expose injustice, raise consciousness, and affirm human dignity.

In the spirit of Nannie Helen Burroughs, we value education, and collective work and cooperation.

In the spirit of Claudia Jones, we value internationalism and solidarity with liberation movements around the world.

We value our lives, spirits, and our collective personhood.

We value our unique human potential to organize for social change and justice.

We value the work of the poor, oppressed, and disenfranchised.

We value free expression of human love, sexuality, art, culture, and language.

We, the People of ONE DC, as Members, Supporters, Shared Leadership Team, and Staff stand firm and bear witness to the possibility of a just, fair, and equitable District of Columbia.

We share our values with you to build a caring society and community for all.

Fig. 1.a: One DC Values
At ONE DC, our mission is to exercise political strength to create and preserve racial and economic equity in Shaw and the District. We seek to create a community in DC that is equitable for all.

**Our Vision**

We the people of ONE DC envision the nation’s capital as a place where low income, poor and immigrant communities are organized, educated, and trained to take action create and preserve social and economic equity. The membership and leadership of ONE DC will build on and organize with the participatory democracy goals and principles taught by Ella Baker:

- involving grassroots people in the decisions that affect their lives;
- minimizing hierarchy and professionalism in organizations working for social change; and
- engaging direct action to resolve social problems.

The people’s vision is to build power and advantage for communities of color, the working poor, and other groups of oppressed people through grassroots organizing and leadership development. We will develop membership and staff committed to building lifelong relationships with ONE DC and its mission.

The people’s vision is to maintain a safe space where diverse cultures and individual stories are held sacred. We will promote social entrepreneurship and collective use of resources. We will honor teamwork and coalition building as our greatest assets. We will create a unique environment where discussion is respected, disagreement honored, and action-oriented dialogue encouraged to better understand social and economic oppression.

The people’s vision is to develop grassroots leadership that will build a movement for positive systemic change.

Fig. 1.b: ONE DC Vision
Fig. 2: ONE DC structure as of Fall 2019
Learn about ONE DC Values Ancestors!
Reading Recommendations

• Claudia Jones
  • *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* by Carole Boyce Davies
  • *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment* by Carole Boyce Davies

• Denmark Vesey
  • *Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It* by David Roberston

• Ella Jo Baker
  • *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* by Barbara Ransby
  • *Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker*, documentary film directed by Joanne Grant

• Ida B. Wells
  • *Ida: A Sword Among Lions* by Paula Giddings

• Mother Jones
  • *The Autobiography of Mother Jones* by Mother Jones

• Nannie Helen Burroughs
  • *Nannie Helen Burroughs: A Documentary Portrait of an Early Civil Rights Pioneer, 1900–1959* edited by Kelisha B Graves
  • The Nannie Helen Burroughs Project: [http://www.nburroughs.info.org/](http://www.nburroughs.info.org/)

• Standing Bear
  • *Standing Bear Is A Person: The True Story Of A Native American's Quest For Justice*
  • by Stephen Dando-Collins

Additional recommendations welcome!

Check out the ONE DC Library: [www.onedconline.org/library](http://www.onedconline.org/library)
The assembly is a constellation of social movement organizations and people that seek to govern themselves. It is not a network, not a coalition, not an alliance, and not a political party. It is inclusive and not exclusive to one political line or ideology. It is a convergence of social forces. The assembly process is based on the facilitation methodology of collective critical thinking and analysis, resulting in a synthesis that represents the sum organic total of all of the ideas and commitments. The social movement assembly results in action based on that synthesis.

The assembly is a decolonizing process. The assembly process is based on a theory of change that people can create processes that dismantle colonial, neocolonial, and neoliberal systems while at the same time creating a new society.

At the heart of the assembly process is a project to dismantle patriarchy, racism, poverty, capitalism, oppression, exploitation, and violence while replacing those systems with movement governance and liberated institutions.

The assembly creates an open space for people to enter social movements and become active participants and leaders. The assembly is facilitated to encourage maximum participation in order to practice direct participatory democracy at the community level, within particular frontlines, and across social movements.

The assembly is multiracial, multigenerational, multi-ideological, and multi-gendered. The assembly brings all the voices together in a circular fashion and engages the thinking, experiences, and visions of all the participants in order to synthesize and collectively agree on action steps.
WHY is the PMA important?

Our movements need collective action plans, governance, and infrastructure.

Social movements are rising. Social movements exist in the U.S., yet are often disjointed and working separately. We need to build stronger collaborative social movements by deepening our understandings of our common goals and seeking to intersect across issues, frontlines, and regions.

We need autonomous, independent social movements with their own social and economic agendas. Current social, economic, and political systems are designed to fail our communities. Assemblies build parallel democratic infrastructure to determine community action plans.

Multiple strategies and a diversity of tactics are more effective. Attacks on our communities are part of reactionary strategies to dismantle public infrastructure. Multiple strategies engage more people and increase our collective potential to respond, fight back, and win.

Reforms are not enough. We need long-term vision and strategies for liberation. We need to envision alternatives and create new structures to initiate the world that we want and deserve. We need to move from single issues to convergence across frontlines. We need to develop collective strategic plans that create immediate results and also lead to long-term systemic social justice.

Leadership and power must be held by people who live and experience injustice. Our movements are led by people who are affected by social control, oppression, racism, and economic displacement. This guiding principle and practice strengthens the effectiveness of our movements and reduces cooptation and exploitation.

“Our community should be the source of our power.”
Rubén Solís, University Sin Fronteras
Assemblies create community governance, frontline convergence, and movement governance.

Assemblies for Community Governance are organized to bring together people in a particular neighborhood, city, town, constituency, or population in order to share analysis, collaborate, develop and implement action plans that grow community power.

Assemblies for Frontline Convergence are organized to bring together people who work on a similar frontline of struggle in order to share analysis, collaborate, develop and implement action plans that grow cohesion and unity for frontline power.

Assemblies for Movement Governance are organized to represent communities, frontline struggles, and organizations in order to share analysis, collaborate, and develop and implement action plans to convene and grow movement power.

Fig. 4.c
The Peoples Movement Assembly is a gathering of people to make decisions for collective action & power.

The assembly collectively answers:

1. What are the problems we face?
2. What are the solutions?
3. What are we going to do about it?

The assembly is a constellation of social movement organizations and people that seek to govern themselves. It is not a network, not a coalition, not an alliance, and not a political party. It is inclusive and not exclusive to one political line or ideology. It is a convergence of social forces.

The assembly process is based on the facilitation methodology of collective critical thinking and analysis, resulting in a synthesis that represents the sum of all of the ideas and commitments. The social movement assembly results in action based on that synthesis.

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Formerly Incarcerated Peoples Movement Assembly, 2011

Held in Montgomery Alabama. The Ordinary Peoples Society (TOPS) anchored a national assembly of people affected by mass incarceration.

Healing Justice Peoples Movement Assembly, 2010

Held at the second U.S. Social Forum and anchored by Kindred Collective, the HJ PMA developed a historical timeline & launched regional healing justice efforts.

Poor Peoples Caravan & Movement Assembly, 2008

As part of the Global Day of Action, Georgia organizations convened over 600 people to caravan through Atlanta, rally at the capitol, and assemble to develop plans of action.

Fig. 4.f
REMEMBER the PMA is not neutral

The PMA is based in a clear, political analysis that considers the history of place and people, the current conditions, the lived experience of the participants, and relationships of power.

Place and space matters. The PMA reflects the local leadership, culture, and practices of the participants and organizers.

The PMA includes attention to food, culture, music, physical set-up, opportunities to interact, how children are engaged, how bodies move through the space, and ceremony.

The PMA is multi-ideological and creates space for a plurality of understandings and worldviews.

The PMA is based in the capacity and political will of the anchors that organize and create the space. Anchors, as groups or organizations, accept the responsibility of coordinating or moving the collective agreements forward into action.
**BEFORE**

ORGANIZE a planning team of 4-10 people who meet to determine the goals, the agenda, and the recruitment strategy for the PMA.

INVITE people who are most affected by the issues your PMA addresses, members of your organization, and community representatives.

PREPARE the agenda, create the facilitation plan, support the facilitators, create the materials, and prepare the documentation plan.

PREPARE the participants with information about assemblies & expectations.

SET UP the space. Create an atmosphere that is welcoming. Place materials, maps, flipcharts, & art around the room. Consider the set-up of chairs and tables. Prepare sign-in tables, food areas, water stations, breakout spaces, and work stations.

**DURING**

WELCOME the participants, acknowledge the planning team & hosts of the space. Create way for people to know who is present & why they are there.

SET the context of the PMA. Through speakers or exercises, discuss the purpose of gathering, goals of the assembly, the problems you are addressing, and the agenda.

NAME agreements, guidelines, and protocol for the assembly.

PRESENT analysis & historical background of the situation you are facing.

DISCUSS visions for a future where those problems are solved.

CREATE plan of action to move closer to those visions.

PROVIDE food, spaces for informal dialogue, and support for healing.

MAKE clear commitments to take action.

**AFTER**

COLLECT the documentation, sign-in sheets, notes, materials, photos, videos, and surveys.

SYNTHESIZE the notes, declarations, and reportbacks into a draft that captures the essence of the discussion, highlights new and shared ideas, and names clear action steps.

DEBRIEF with the facilitators, planning team, and organizers to evaluate lessons learned.

COMMUNICATE with all the participants. Share contact information, synthesis, pictures, videos and quotes from the assembly.

COMMUNICATE with the broader community so that people know what was accomplished, what is happening next, and how they can get involved.

ORGANIZE to accomplish the goals and commitments set forth at the assembly. Establish or re-invigorate teams, working groups, and committees.

Fig. 4.h
**HOW IT WORKS**

Organizing a PMA

The PMA is an **organizing strategy**. The PMA is an ongoing process to practice and exercise power at the community level, across frontlines, and as social movements.

The PMA puts the trust and leadership in the people assembled to make decisions together. It is not about a single leader, organization, or pre-determined goal.

The **Before / During / After** cycle reflects the organizing process. Preparation, facilitation, participation, reflection, and follow-up is critical to advancing from one stage of development to the next. As each PMA is organized, it should build on the previous lessons and accumulate knowledge towards future gains.

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**EVERYONE HAS A ROLE**

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<th>facilitation</th>
<th>cultural work</th>
<th>documentation</th>
<th>participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teams of facilitators are familiar with both the agenda and the organizing process.</td>
<td>Artists &amp; culture bearers engage the cultural practices of the place and create opportunities for culture to infuse the experience.</td>
<td>Notetakers participate in the large &amp; small group spaces. Photographers &amp; videographers prepare to capture the dynamism of the assembly.</td>
<td>Different from a conference or workshop space, all participants are responsible for active engagement in the process, the dialogues, the logistics, and the synthesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple facilitators play different roles. Greeting, presenting, overall flow, small groups or frontline assemblies, and synthesis require prepared facilitation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Preparing participants for the experience creates a smoother flow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizers</td>
<td></td>
<td>space support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizers recruit participants, register delegations, follow up with interested folks, and make sure that connections are made.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work teams and participants contribute to coordinating food, travel, lodging, and logistics of the space.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4.i
SAMPLE AGENDA
Based on Climate Justice Assembly, New Orleans, 2016
Appreciations to Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy

Opening
Welcome & Appreciations
Agenda Review, Meeting Goals & Community Agreements

Honor the People & the Work
Community Representatives connect climate crisis to tribal sovereignty, body autonomy, public health, & immigrant rights

Phase 1
SET the CONTEXT
Impact of Extraction Industries on Human Rights

Human Right to Water & Oil/Gas Leases in Gulf
Two presentations that highlight concerns of Gulf Coast frontline. Describe the oil and gas leases and their impact on climate and communities. Connect local realities to global examples (Flint MI crisis, global droughts). Introduce opportunities for collective action.

Phase 2
VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE
Small Group Strategy Sessions
Assess the frontline reality:
Q#1: How does oil/gas drilling impact your community (good and bad)?
Q#2: What would your community look like without oil/gas drilling?
Vision for sustainable future (people + planet):
Q#3: What could our communities look like with renewable energy?
Q#4: What should we do to ensure healthier communities in the next 90 days?
In the next year? In the next 3 years?
Report Back to Large Group

Phase 3
COMMIT TO ACTIONS
Facilitation Team presents: Synthesized Collective Plans for Action
Use Dot-Mocracy to determine priorities
Each participant selects 2-3 priorities they are willing to work on
Top 5 choices are selected as priorities to move forward

Closing
Review Action Steps
Evaluate what went well & identify changes for next time
Drumming & DJs close out the space

Prepare space
Sign in Sheets & Flipcharts
Stadium circle seating
Chairs up front
Food & Water stations
Movement banners hung

Multiple voices, perspectives, and experiences reflect the reality of who is impacted by the problem

Small groups of 4-5 assign roles (facilitator, timekeeper, notetaker, person to report)

Movement Music & African Drumming while Facilitation Team synthesizes action plans

Break down space
Collect Sign-in Sheets
Collect notes & flipcharts
Facilitation team debrief

Fig. 4.j
DOCUMENTATION
Notetaking, film, & photography

Documentation records movement history & people's knowledge. Documentation allows for a cumulative effect that carries decisions & analysis forward.

Based on the Agenda, determine which parts of the Assembly need verbatim notetaking, generalized notes, video, and/or photography.

Prioritize points of the agenda that present heavy content, small group work, and large group commitments.

Assign notetakers or create an open list for participants to sign up for tasks. Make sure to track who is taking notes, photos, or videos for each part and how to contact them afterwards.

Develop a team with a point person who will collect ALL notes, photos, and video.

Specific Information to include while Notetaking:
- Name, date, & time
- Name(s) of the facilitator(s)
- Number of the participants
- Stated goals of the session
- What actually happened (a presentation, go-around when each person spoke, creation of a product to present to a larger group)
- Key points of the Political Landscape and Movement Analysis developed
- Key moments of consolidation (agreement) and division (disagreement)
- The strategic directions discussed and the commitments determined

Fig. 4.k
SMALL GROUP FACILITATION
Questions to consider in preparation for the Assembly

What are the goals in breaking up into small groups?
(examples: deeper discussions, address specific issues/topics, work on specific &
differentiated strategies, break up by regional/local groups, etc.)

What is the ideal size of the small groups and how many can you have?

How will you break-up into groups?
(examples: random count off by the # of groups you want, separate by specific
interests, or self-select into groups)

Who is facilitating each group?
(examples: prepared facilitators, self-selected, representatives from particular
organizations or communities)

What are the specific questions that the small group is discussing?

Would worksheets be helpful? What questions and prompts should be included?
(examples: a chart of questions that the facilitator can follow, includes a basic agenda
for the small group & clear instructions for what the groups is bringing back)

What are the groups bringing back to the larger group?
(clear resolutions, priority action steps, proposals for action, commitments, etc.)

CHILDREN'S ASSEMBLY

History and global liberation movements demonstrate the
critical role of children in movement spaces. The Children's
Assembly is not childcare. It is a constructive space facilitated
so that children ages 2-12 have a meaningful experience(104,173),(797,989)
that mirrors the questions and issues that the youth and adults
are working on in the Assembly. Participants in the Southern
Movement Children's Assemblies have engaged elders about the
Jim Crow era, painted murals to contribute to local schools, and
developed video interviews with adult participants focusing on
key questions of that particular
Assembly. Participants of the
Childens Assembly contribute
what they have learned during
the Movement Council at the
end of the PMA.
Figure 5: PMA Schedule: guest speakers

- Roadmap: in this section, we're going to talk about alternatives to status quo. First housing, then policing. Then carving out autonomy in this racialized capital system in form of Community Land Trust and worker cooperatives.

  - Right to Housing (15 minutes - total of 25 minutes)
  - CLT's and LEC
  - Leads: ONE DC member's LEC researcher, outline of potential presentation [here](#) and (Ella Jo Baker Co-op) are confirmed!
    - Their points of contact.
    - They've been told they have 20 minutes.

  - Community Control of Police Board (15 minutes - PACA) - total of 40 minutes
    - Leads: PACA
    - For an outline of PACA's presentation, see [here](#).

- How are these radical alternatives possible in this racialized capitalist system? The Answer: Community Land Trusts and Cooperatives (5 minutes - 45 minutes)
  - Introduce Community Land Trust, in the context of Cooperation Jackson
    - Describe Cooperation Jackson with a focus on worker cooperatives (this is how we're discussing income)
    - How they have worked to fulfill unmet needs of the community both with their housing and commercial enterprises.

- Activity: (35 minutes - (10 minute buffer)
  - Table layout: (write the answer for all of these on the big paper)
    - What vacant land / buildings / property is there in your neighborhood?
    - What are the unmet or undermet needs in your community?
    - How could people in your community work together to meet those needs?
      - Specifically what skills / labor / or resources could you contribute; skills.
  - How can we take care of each other in our communities? What are some ‘Neighborhood Caregiver’ activities?
  - Now think about the vacant property, unmet needs and collective capacity and imagine how the vacant property could be turned into a community controlled cooperative?
    - What would it include?
Figure 6: Goal worksheet following ONE DC’s PMA. Members and volunteers answered each question in depth at the follow-up meeting.

**BUILDING OUR STRATEGY**

**Goals - Thurs. 2/13**

1. What are the long-term goals of our campaign (beyond 2020)? What does a WIN look like?
2. What are the intermediate goals for our campaign (by December 2020)?
3. What short-term or partial victories can we win as steps toward our long-term goal (week-to-week, month-to-month in 2020)?
4. How will our campaign:
   - Win concrete improvements in people’s lives?
   - Give people a sense of their own power?
   - Change the relations of power?

**GOALS SHOULD BE SMART:**

*Specific* – direct, detailed, and meaningful

*Measurable* – quantifiable to track progress and success

*Achievable* – takes into account the energy, capacity, tools and resources we have

*Realistic* – possible to achieve in some reasonable amount of time. Realistic does not necessarily mean we already have the resources to win. It may require us to grow and stretch.

*Time-sensitive* – there are deadlines for ourselves and decision-makers

**Organizational Considerations, Constituents & Allies - Thurs. 2/20**

1. What are the resources that we (ONE DC) bring to the campaign, such as money, staff, facilities, reputation, etc.?
2. What are additional resources that we will need?
3. What are the specific ways we want ONE DC to be strengthened by this campaign:
   - How will we expand our leadership?
   - How will we deepen the experience of our existing leadership?
   - How will this build ONE DC’s membership base?
   - How will we expand into new constituencies?
   - How will this help us raise more money?
4. Who cares about the issues enough to join our campaign (individuals, groups, organizations)?
5. What internal problems do we need to consider if the campaign is to succeed?

*Adapted from Midwest Academy Strategy Chart midwestacademy.com*

Fig. 6.a.
### Opponents & Targets - Thurs. 2/27

1. **Who are our opponents?**
   - What will our victory cost them?
   - What will they do/spend to oppose us?
   - How strong are they?

2. **Who are our primary targets?**
   A primary target is always a person. It is never an institution or elected body.
   - Who has the power to give you what you want?
   - What power do we have over them?

3. **Who are our secondary targets?**
   - Who has the power over the people with the power to give you what you want?
   - What power do we have over them?

### Tactics - Thurs. 3/5

For each target, list the tactics that we can use to make our power felt. Tactics must be:

- In context.
- Flexible and creative.
- Directed at a specific target.
- Make sense to the membership.
- Be backed up by a specific form of power.

Some examples of tactics include:

- Protests, rallies, sit-ins, council walk-throughs, Media events, Actions for information and demands, Public hearings, Strikes, Voter registration and voter education, Lawsuits, Accountability sessions, Elections, Negotiations

### Finalizing Our Strategy for Presentation - Thurs. 3/5

1. **How will we present our strategy to the membership at the Annual Meeting on March 14?**

*Adapted from Midwest Academy Strategy Chart midwestacademy.com*
Section 2

List of questions used by ONE DC for PMA

The following is a list of questions used by ONE DC for the PMA. Each section corresponds to a segment of the PMA. Some segments did not include questions.

Section 3
1. Who are your people?
2. Where do you go to be in the community (to find your people)?

Section 4
1. What affects you personally?
2. What made you the most angry?
3. What would your table want to take collective action on?

Section 5
1. What vacant land/buildings/property is there in your neighborhood?
2. What are the unmet or undermet needs in your community?
3. How could people in your community work together to meet those needs?
4. Specifically what skills labor or resources could you contribute?
5. How can we take care of each other in our communities? What are some neighborhood caregiver activities?
6. Now think about the vacant property, unmet needs and collective capacity and imagine how the vacant property could be turned into a community controlled cooperative?
   a. What would it include?
   b. How would you protect each other and stay safe within the community?
7. Come to a consensus, what would your table want to take collective action on?