

**Manual Transmission: The Do-It-Yourself Theory of Occupy Wall Street and Spain's 15M**

“Whereas in the disciplinary era *sabotage* was the fundamental notion of resistance, in the era of imperial control it may be *desertion*. Whereas being-against in modernity often meant a direct and/or dialectical opposition of forces, in postmodernity being-against might well be most effective in an oblique or diagonal stance. Battles against the Empire might be won through subtraction and defection. This desertion does not have a place; it is the evacuation of places of power.’ (Hardt and Negri, *Empire*: 212)

Where do we look for protests? When protesters leave the public space does the protest end?

Is protest a finite action or can it become indefinite, a way of being? How would one go about such a task? What would that even look like?

The spectacular protest occupations of 2011, by Occupy Wall Street and Spain's *Indignado*/15M Movement ended for various reasons. Even before their violent physical evictions, internal concerns were voiced about the viability - and desirability - of organizing the ongoing protests at a citywide scale. A year later, participants in the anniversary demonstrations of both OWS (in New York) and the 15M (in Barcelona) re-emphasized their critiques of centralization, and greater emphasis was placed on autonomous and dispersed action than had been the case a year prior. The citywide General Assemblies, the massive, participatory, decision-making bodies that had captured the attention of visitors to the 2011 occupations were revived for the anniversary celebrations, but these bodies had retained more symbolic than pragmatic value for organizing protests. In the intervening year, these massive assemblies had been largely replaced by spokescouncils (in the case of OWS) and inter-neighborhood *coordinadoras* (coordinating meetings for the 15M); in both cases facilitating the coordination and exchange of information between smaller, neighborhood-based or issue-specific organizing groups that had continued to meet post-eviction. While enjoying less media visibility, these mobilizations seemed to be persisting without the centralized, sustained, public occupations from which they had emerged. The protest against “politics as normal” had become manifest in the enactment of other kinds of political engagement. These one-year anniversaries served as an opportunity to showcase in what new directions

participants had been directing their energy since the removal of the 2011 encampments, and where they imagined the future of the mobilizations would go.

Prompted by these shifts in protest practice and imaginaries, this paper will take up the following lines of inquiry: that if activists from both contexts have come to the conclusion that sustained, large-scale occupations are untenable or have reached the limit of their utility, what more sustainable modes of action do they imagine and promote, and how do they justify them? That considering a common denominator among these recent mobilizations was the call to take public spaces, what does it mean for qualifying ideas of “success” or longevity that sustained, visible protest are no longer apparent? And finally, how might these changes prompt us to reflect on our ways of understanding what social change looks like?

In order to address these questions, the following paper will examine some of the strategies advocated by 15M and OWS activists, as they have been expressed, first through the movements’ own self-published, theoretical periodicals and later, in manuals published by participants for the 1-year anniversary mobilizations. Consistent with activist’ emphasis on prefiguration and process, I want to consider the significance of the platforms through which these conversations have continued. As a window into how participants are trying to go about creating the worlds they wish to live in, it is useful to consider how these post-plaza modes of discussion themselves succeed or fail to take up some of the movements’ values and visions of social change. As I will show, the particular format of the do-it-yourself manual embodies the kinds of collective-yet-dispersed actions experimented with in earlier encampment forms and taken further in activists’ theoretical publications. The production of journals and manuals gives us a window into the past and future trajectories of these two mobilizations.

Finally, the paper will conclude by taking up some of the literature of contemporary social movements, in order to see in which ways these two mobilizations continue and break from, pre-existing models of protest politics. By looking at the movement literature produced by activist-theorists themselves, we can see how in both cases, writers have proposed a shift

in phases, from mass aggregation<sup>1</sup> to mass evacuation, from calls to suspend the ordinary, to attempts at creating a new ordinary. Drawing upon established protest repertoires, but moving towards dispersed modes of being-in-resistance, this potential shift (which is still very much in question) challenges key, underlying assumptions of social movement research and analysis: how we think about the qualities of scale, stability and success, and where we look to find protest and social change. In their recent 2012 *Declaration*, Hardt and Negri argue that what is more important than the political experimentations and constitutional principles of these recent mobilizations, are the new democratic subjectivities they are attempting to produce. The ways of being transformed through protest, through the rejection of old models. “The movements” they speculate, “are writing a manual for how to create and live in a new society”(Hardt and Negri 2012: XX). Yes. And now we can take that to mean literally.

### **The revolution will be theorized...**

In May of 2011, thousands of people throughout the state of Spain, angered by decreasing economic prospects and a perceived lack of accountability for politicians and bankers; inspired by popular uprisings in Iceland, Tunisia and Egypt; and communicating through mostly-online networks, such as *Democracy Real Ya* and *Juventud Sin Futuro*, organized marches and protests in 58 different cities (Feixa 2012). Beginning in Madrid and spreading quickly throughout the country, protesters took over and held city plazas, forming encampments, some of which lasted for weeks. They managed the day-to-day affairs of the camp as well as protest actions through General Assemblies and smaller commissions, streaming their protests live through social media. Referred to as the *indignados* -the indignant - for their unifying rejection of the status quo, participants have embraced a diverse array of interests and demands. In attempt to disrupt reductive media portrayals of the protests as based only on indignation or rejection (and thus without any positive contributions or programs of their own) many participants have preferred to use the designation 15M – the May 15<sup>th</sup> movement - after the date on which the statewide call for occupations took place (or

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowing the concept of the “logic of aggregation” Jeff Juris uses to describe the individualized modes of mass participation in recent mobilizations facilitated by social media (Juris 2012)

plaza, as it were).

On September 17 of 2011 a similar scene played out in the financial district in New York City, where a group of activists met and began an occupation of Manhattan's Zuccotti Park that grew, and lasted until November 15<sup>th</sup>. Similar to - and inspired by - the *acampadas* of Spain, participants debated and managed the occupation through General Assemblies and various issue-specific working groups. The occupation in New York took longer to gain national attention, but after several weeks of increasing controversy, Occupy Wall Street – as it became known - inspired a wave of occupations in cities throughout the US and beyond, passing on strategies and concepts for similar occupations throughout the world. Equally broad in their critique, many Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protesters, like those of the 15M, rejected “politics as usual,” which for many centered on a perceived failure of representational government to reign in the power of large financial institutions. Drawing on self-reflexive feminist and anarchist traditions, protesters at OWS were as interested in their own internal politics and issues of self-organization, as they were in evaluating the protest's external impact. The debates taking place in the plazas - about the nature of social change and the best way to go about it - quickly expanded from the physical spaces of the assemblies and working groups, onto virtual forums and interestingly, into print forms. Years after the end of the physical encampment, debates have continued over how the protests were handled, whether success can be claimed, and how to think about the protests' impact.

Within the emphasis on mobilizations' use of digital technology (Castells 2012), an interesting aspect of these mobilizations has been the persistent relevance of print media. In the origin stories of the 15M and Occupy Wall Street<sup>2</sup>, printed forms, and especially printed calls to action have been accredited as playing a major role in precipitating convergence. In the case of OWS, an issue of the magazine *Adbusters* set the date of September 17th for a protest occupation – a Tahrir Moment – to take place in lower Manhattan. The call was embraced by local organizing efforts and, to the surprise of many, readers actually responded

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<sup>2</sup> Borrowing the expression from Wendy Wolford's look at the emergence of the MST in Brazil (Wolford 2010)

(Shulman 2011, Schwartz 2011). With the 15M, the term “*indignados*” is frequently attributed to an essay by the French human rights advocate Stéphane Hessel, entitled “*Indignez-vous!*” – which has been translated to “Time for Outrage!” but also uses the reflexive verb form command to “outrage-yourselves.” The essay which came out in October of 2010 brought together many of the themes taken up by the indignados: political corruption, the impunity of those “responsible” for the crisis, declining investment in the public good and even concerns of environmental degradation (Hessel 2010, Feixa 2012, Castells 2012). Though the degree of causality attributable to either of these publications is likely exaggerated in both cases, as frequently cited artifacts they have proven to be popular anchoring devices for researchers and reporters seeking authorship in a cycle of protests that has otherwise disavowed authority.

Participants in both mobilizations have, since their beginning, critiqued intellectual vanguardism and sought to substantiate this position through the open production of their own literature, emphasizing collective involvement in not only planning actions, but in theorizing collective action and in seeking to dissolve the separation between theory and practice. In both mobilizations, the conversation about tactics and longer-term strategies did not remain within the physical space of the plazas. Nor were these discussions the sole province of a closed group of thinkers (although some voices are heard differently and have dominated the conversation at times). This theoretically oriented literature is only one part of a vast array of media produced in both milieus, which has included videos, blogs, hard-copy publications in the form of newspapers and magazines and even more ephemeral modes of mass communication including Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. Within this proliferation of media, both mobilizations have emphasized an open-ended dialogue, with recurring calls for articles, critiques and submissions in regard to theorizing the location and future of each “movement” - building on the conversations and forms of horizontal decision-making in which day-to-day functions of the original occupations had been decided. Myriad projects have emerged in the intervening year-and-a-half since the occupations themselves ended and more will likely

follow. This paper will focus on two theory-oriented publications: *Tidal* (from OWS) and *Rebelaos* (15M), as they were put to the task of conveying ongoing dialogues to audiences outside of the plazas.

*Tidal*<sup>3</sup>, is the product of Occupy Wall Street's "Occupy Theory" working group. The first issue was released in December of 2011, several months after the initial occupation of Zuccotti Park. Its fourth and current issue was published in February of 2013. Each copy of *Tidal* is a collection of articles written by different writers or groups of writers, focused on theoretical analyses of Occupy Wall Street's historical position, current issues and/or trajectory. In the journal, authors' names are presented without institutional affiliations or credentials, though some writers are more likely to be recognized for their theorizing in other venues. In attempting to build an "ongoing, horizontal conversation," one that "endeavors to be accessible to the common person," *Tidal*'s writers largely avoid using difficult jargon. The journal is also distributed free in print and digital format and an even-more accessible online forum supplements published articles with responses and debate (*Tidal* #1: 22).

*Rebelaos*<sup>4</sup> is a similar collection of articles and resources, put together by *Afinidad Rebelde*,<sup>5</sup> a group of activists based mostly out of Andalusia, Spain, though the anonymity of the articles and of the group itself makes the writers provenance harder to discern. The only issue printed so far was crowd-funded through online donations and released on March 15 of 2012. 500,000 copies were printed in the original run and the publication has been translated into a total of four languages: Castilian Spanish, Catalan, Basque and Portuguese. Like *Tidal*, it offers analyses of current political and economic conditions as well as suggestions for further action. This was not the only publication offering theoretically engaged discussion amongst 15M participants, but it has been among the most-circulated publications and offers a means of comparison for the purpose of this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.occupytheory.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rebelaos.net/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://n-1.cc/profile/afinidadrebelde>

## **Tidal (Occupied Wall Street)**

“Creating new autonomous community zones is necessary for the survival of the movement. We must project our vision of a just world onto the blank paving stones of public parks and into the silent hallways of abandoned schools. Now it is time to shift our communities—to turn our collective imaginary into a collective reality...Our collective liberation rejects the authority stolen from the people. We reject your oppressive stability in favor of our chaotic liberty fueled by self-empowerment and self-determination. We will be solving our own problems while you, who have solved none of them, become obsolete. Now it is about human creativity and the power of action. All power to the imagination. Occupy Everywhere.” (Suzahn E. Tidal #1: 7)

Collectivity, authority, liberation, autonomy; the treatment of these concepts as they recur throughout *Tidal*'s four issues gives a sense of how Occupy's activist-theorists envision organizing beyond the space of Zuccotti Park. The examples of community space where this shift from “collective imaginary into a collective reality” is imagined are public parks and schools, but the nature of the community, the people with whom our collective reality will be transformed remains open. The group Student Debt Strike challenges readers to “Get in the streets and build community,” linking to other students in similar situations of financial stress by participating physically in the then-upcoming May Day protests (Student Debt Strike, “Getting Ready for May Day 2012” *Tidal* #2: 18). Author Nina Mehta reflects on the success of training activists in facilitating meetings through the “Occupy Town Square” model, in which experienced facilitators brought the organizing principles and practices to other boroughs of New York following the eviction of Zuccotti. As Mehta writes:

“In the absence of the park, our relationships are still threaded through physical space. But now we are mobile, dispersed, decentralized, and this is not a bad thing... In our mobility, we can help to amplify campaigns happening throughout the city like the Sunset Park Rent Strike or neighborhood Cop Watch projects. Developing relationships and connecting struggles requires learning and listening on the ground. OTS [Occupy Town Square] has facilitated a network of interconnected spaces and conversations where this can take place across the city. There is always more work to be done in building critical solidarity, but our assemblies are a hopeful starting point” (Nina Mehta, *Tidal* #3: 21).

Through the mobile form of organizing presented by “Occupy Town Square,” assemblies and campaigns anchored in physical spaces become part of a network that operates as a collective conversation. The articulation between spaces, understood as being always in need of work, is considered here necessary for developing mutual support and “critical solidarity” between

communities. The emphasis on the ongoing tasks of building within and between echoes the active constitution of community that was central to the encampments. Rather than coalescing pre-existing, self-identifying blocs of participants, OWS general assemblies and working groups have brought new communities into existence through conversation itself.

The theme of authority is taken up in critiques of external power as well as discussions of what authority should look like within activist spaces. In the prior vein, Jose Martin, denounces the New York Police Department's "Stop and Frisk" campaign and the acceptance of authority a discourse of rights promotes:

In a world where we shared power and accepted no permanent structures of authority over us or the land, we wouldn't need rights... Rights are our tools in the present age, tools that we have to defend ourselves against an otherwise even more brutal system. To place rights onto a pedestal is to legitimate that system. To think of rights tactically is to leave open the door that we can concoct something better." (Jose Martin, Stop and Frisk and Other Racist, Capitalist, Bullshit; Tidal #3:12)

Martin suggests that recovering rights guaranteed by permanent structures of authority should not be seen as the end of organizing, nor should *we* need to establish authorities to protect rights as we "concoct something better." Offering a similar critique of re-establishing fixed structures of power, Anteant, a contributor to the first issue, suggests that: "In this movement, institutions should not have power. They should be for facilitating the coordination of individuals" ("On Power," Tidal #1:10). Using the example of the General Assembly - the large, decision-making body of the Occupy Wall Street encampment - Anteant makes the assertion that people are not bound to follow the decisions of the General Assembly, nor should they be, even if those decisions are made by consensus. The article differentiates the General Assembly from a parliament in that the "[the GA] doesn't pass laws. People *must* retain their individual agency, meaning they can chose *not* to follow the GA's decisions" ("On Power," Tidal #1: 10, original emphasis). Restricting the power of internal institutions, and promoting the idea that collective structures should have the role of facilitating individuals' participation rather than governing them; these principles are presented as critical aspects of the mobilization from the beginning. They are also presented as crucial values for



any emerging projects if they are to bring us closer to that world without permanent structures of authority the authors imagine.

If occupation was necessary to establish mutually supportive collectivities, liberation is the next phase in the process by which new, imagined worlds become reality. Like community, liberation refers not just to the liberation of physical spaces - through occupation - but the liberation of individuals from their roles in perpetuating “the system.” Measuring the success of a mobilization is difficult, and runs the risk of being distorted by importing measures of social movement success from other contexts. As Suzahn E. in the third issue of *Tidal* points out:

The number of people that came to the mobilization matters little if lives remain unchanged — if everyone goes back to their offices. Concepts such as “real wins” and “victories” are useful but dangerous. Liberation is facilitated by a fundamental shift in priorities on all levels, towards collective support and dismantling control and oppression over each other. (“The Revolution Will Not Have a Bottom Line” *Tidal* #3: 9)

That success is measured in the changing of lives and interpersonal relationships reveals something of the nature of the liberation imagined. Success by this definition could be one person not returning to their routine, or not “going back to their office” – a shift in personal practices that undermine forms of oppression “at all levels.” A vision of collective liberation is given in the same issue by “The Invisible Army of Debtors” in their declaration which reads:

We are the 99%. We are going to bring this system to its knees. We can, because we wield the one power that all the armies of the world can never defeat: the power of refusal... We cannot stop them through elections when both parties are bought and paid for. One thing we can do is to quietly withdraw our consent. And so we have done. By refusing to pay the money they claim we owe them. (Invisible Army, “First Communiqué” *Tidal* #3: 31)

In refusing to pay our debts, “we” as the collective, 99% can withdraw our consent to being ruled and in doing so, symbolically and materially undermine “this system.” Liberation is imagined not through violent confrontation but the bleeding out of material resources through a widespread refusal to continue participation.

The result of collective liberation thus imagined is the opening of new possibilities for autonomous self-organizing. Within the idea of a collective conversation between occupied spaces, each assembly maintains its autonomy to make decisions for itself. Likewise, each individual – as argued by Anteant – would retain the autonomy to make a personal decision about whether or not to follow with the decisions made in assembly. Incorporating outside examples, Marina Sitrin contributes to the second issue of *Tidal*, describing the process in which workers in Argentina’s recuperated factories attempted to maintain their autonomy from the State as they sought to liberate their workplaces during the economic crisis of 2001. For workers, “the perspective on material support is to take what movement participants can get only as long as they maintain their own agenda. As soon as the State puts demands or qualifiers on the offer, the people walk away” (“Pulling the Emergency Brake,” *Tidal* #2: 7). The assertion that would-be liberators will at some point have to negotiate with the state troubles some of the earlier, more dramatic ideas of complete withdrawal. Through the examples from Argentina, Sitrin is able to show how such abstract calls for building autonomy have historically come into contact with existing authority; a point made visceral in the police eviction of the plazas, but not addressed substantially in the generally optimistic autonomous visions of the bulk of the journal. Turning to examples from the 15M, we can see some comparable themes, situated in even more engaged forms of activist practice.

### **Rebelaos (15M)**

<sup>1</sup> “It is necessary that our horizon of political intervention go further than a repetition or continuation of the 15M” (“De la autoorganización en las plazas a la construcción de una nueva soberanía popular” *Rebelaos*: 3)

In addition to revitalized neighborhood assemblies and newly-formed popular commissions (on labor, housing, feminism, etc.), pre-existing activist networks played a visible role in facilitating the mass occupations of the 15M, in circulating information among *acampadas* and projecting information from the encampments outwards. Online networks like *Juventud Sin Futuro* (“Youth Without Future”) and *Democracia Real Ya* (“Real Democracy Already”)

have been credited with calling for occupations, but alternative media collectives and various kinds of cooperatives have also been involved, explicitly as organizations, or in informal support roles. In either case, activists have openly drawn on these pre-existing relations and resources. In an example of a new collective, *Afinidad Rebelde* came together in October of 2011 to produce *Rebelaos* (“Rebel yourselves”) – the set of articles written around the subject of developing ways of living autonomously from the State and focusing on facets of daily life. In each article, theoretical arguments are accompanied by a list of resources, mostly organizations engaged in the kinds of projects that are discussed. As with the previous discussion of *Tidal*, several recurring themes will be explored - disobedience, affinity, autogestion and integration - before moving on to a comparative discussion of OWS and the 15M via their texts.

We call to initiate and extend an action of fiscal disobedience towards the Spanish State, to its institutions, as a consequential action to demonstrate that we will not pay its debts because we do not recognize this constitution. A fiscal disobedience that serves to nurture the autogestion of the assemblies and from these, to give absolute priority to the participatory financing of the resources we consider truly public. (“La insumisión fiscal como estrategia de rebeldía” *Rebelaos*: 16)

Fiscal disobedience undermines the state materially. It offers a protest, a rejection of state legitimacy, as it frees resources for the construction of an alternative, “truly public” mode of resource distribution. As with the liberation and autonomy tropes of OWS, both disobedience and autogestion (self-management) are presented as the outcome of collectivizing efforts.

*Rebelaos*’ authors call for organizing groups based on the idea of affinity.

The authors cite their understanding of “affinity groups” on the model of the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica*, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (or FAI) established by Spanish labor organizers in 1927, preceding the Second Spanish Republic and the Spanish Civil War. They go on to describe the function and purpose of organizing based on groups of “no more than 20 people.” An affinity group (as *Rebelaos*’ authors define it):

...shares basic lines of thought and direct action, which is to say it makes decisions and carries out actions to respond to concrete needs, with the end of advancing strategic objectives shared by the group. At the least, it is the proper group that

assumes the responsibility of bringing to practice transformative action, without intermediaries, representatives or delegates. Affinity is for this a weapon to fortify communitarian relations and closeness, even more when there are many affinity groups interacting, generating powerful networks of affinity (“Activistas: grupos de afinidad trabajando en red” *Rebelaos*: 21)

This idea that affinity groups, and networks of affinity groups, can form around “*basic* lines of thought and direct action” to respond to “concrete needs” is expanded upon in other articles through the concept of “*consenso minimo*” - or minimum consensus, the minimum agreement required between individuals or collectives in order for them to work together. Minimum consensus is presented as an attempt to limit the amount of deliberation required before collective action can occur. It can bring together large numbers of people for specific causes without bounding them to permanent structures, or even shared analyses. Minimum consensus agreements were often distributed before and during 15M protest events and contained all of the agreements made by the assembly convening the march. By avoiding fixed, over-arching structures, affinity groups in minimum consensus-based networks are able to define in clear terms, the qualities and parameters of the projects they initiate. This also means however, that such efforts have little insurance against risk or failure (if projects continually fail, or if more or longer involvement is needed in the case of arrests). And it is also unclear how violations of consensus are to be regulated, as in the case of property damage during a march in which such actions were agreed against in assembly.

The concept of self-management, introduced earlier as *autogestion* – and conveyed in the phrase “*haztela tu misma*” (“do-it-yourself”) - is explored in detail in various articles. With the aim of constructing a “new popular sovereignty,” the authors of *Rebelaos* make the claim that sufficient resources already exist to extend these models beyond plaza occupations and protests. “To arrive at this new state” they insist, “does not require a quantitative increase of our energy as much as a qualitative development of our capacities” (“15M: de la autorganización en las plazas a la construcción de una nueva soberanía popular,” *Rebelaos*: 3). This idea echoes that of the first quote, outlining the necessity of “fiscal disobedience” for freeing the resources required to build alternative means of self-provisioning. Fiscal

disobedience here is presented as:

...the best form of living in insolvency. It is the source of generating new economic relations, new social relations, new trust, new rights and for that we substitute the laws, the privations and the repression of the capitalist system for liberty and the trust that we find participating in the new society (“Insolvencia y cooperativas,” *Rebelaos*: 14)

For most readers from the US (or Spain), the idea of voluntary bankruptcy might not seem like the most desirable course of action, but in the context of ongoing financial crisis, where general unemployment exceeds 25%, youth unemployment (under 25 years old) exceeds 52%, and insolvency might not be avoidable, using financial insolvency strategically, as a tool for social change, re-frames what might otherwise generally be seen as a profoundly undesirable state in which to be<sup>6</sup>. In any case, this shift in meaning is what the authors are intending to create as a step towards redefining social and economic relations. “The best form of living in insolvency” is one offering the possibility of collapsing the system that has produced it. But if we imagine ourselves as new participants in one of these mobilizations, having read and (maybe?) been inspired by such analyses, we might ask ourselves – where do we start? As individual readers of these journals calling, how do *we* take action when we are no longer able to occupy city plazas, when there is no clear rallying place at which to meet? Where do we go? Lucky for us there is a manual... Two even!

In the year following the initial OWS and 15M mobilizations, groups of activists have taken these theoretical discussions and in both cases produced manuals offering concrete modes of action for continuing the struggle now that both mobilizations have entered into post-eviction phases. That activists within these spaces have distributed manuals – *the Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual* (OWS) and *the Manual de Desobediencia Economica* (15M) – is a phenomena worth considering in itself. As a format, manuals attempt to connect the theoretical to the applied in specific and immediate ways. They do a different kind of work from journals, producing what could be called a “tactical network” of resource sharing, one aimed at immediate political intervention to be contrasted with the ongoing, “strategic

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<sup>6</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística, accessed December 9, 2012 [://www.ine.es]

networking” of inter-activist theoretical discussions taking place through *Tidal* and *Rebelaos*, adopting the distinction between strategic and tactical networking that Jeffrey Juris uses in the context of the anti-corporate globalization movement, and others have used previously (Juris 2008). By looking at what the producers of these media have to say and how they say it, we are given a window into these movements as participants see them and as participants hope they can become.

### **The Debt Resistors’ Operations Manual**

On September 15<sup>th</sup> of 2012, members of the Strike Debt assembly and Occupy Wall Street presented the *Debt Resistors’ Operations Manual* (DROM) at a public book launch that took place at Judson Memorial Church, across the street from other OWS events taking place in New York City’s Washington Square Park. The launch was part of the weekend of protests and workshops celebrating a year since the beginning of the Occupy Wall Street encampment of September 17<sup>th</sup> of 2011<sup>7</sup>. Copies of the manual were given away and attendees broke off into discussion groups, encouraged by the authors to think about how they themselves might organize around the idea of debt.

While the manual exists to prompt individualized reflections on how one might best apply some or all of these practices to one’s own situation, the authors of the DROM insist on the “strength in numbers” produced by an imagined community of readers all simultaneously taking up these practices (Anderson 1991). While “individually our debts overwhelm us; collectively our debts can overwhelm the system” they argue, and as such, any doubts about the efficacy of debt resistance should be weighed against the potential of many other, fellow-readers taking part. Like any decent manual, the DROM goes into quite specific detail, explaining how to go about particular operations of debt relief and readjustment. Much like the critique of pursuing rights presented in *Tidal*, the authors of DROM reject the idea of pursuing a political program of “debt forgiveness,” which they argue would legitimize the political institutions that have also long profited from debt. Instead, the manual advocates for

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<sup>7</sup> Facebook event page: <https://www.facebook.com/events/175989395870394/>

more immediate actions from below, intended to help readers extricate themselves from debt and from these financial and political institutions entirely.

The manual itself is divided into two halves. The first half focuses on forms of personal debt and how to challenge and extricate oneself from them. The sub-sections are, as listed: “credit scores and consumer reporting agencies, credit card debt, medical debt, student debt, and housing debt.” The second half discusses forms of collective debt and is more descriptive than instructional - situating personal debt within a larger political economic structure that, as a whole, depends on debt to function. The sections of the collective debt half are: “municipal debt, fringe finance transaction products and services, fringe finance credit products and services, debt collection, bankruptcy, and prospects for change.” Included within the appendix of the manual are sample forms for procedures like: “contesting and repairing credit reports or disputing medical debts.” The DROM identifies itself as only one of numerous projects attempting to link multiple open assemblies and organizations through collective action. As the authors from Strike Debt and Occupy Wall Street explain in the concluding “Prospects for Change” section:

Debt resistance can take many forms and Strike Debt is developing tactics, resources and frameworks for generalizing the fight against the debt system. These initiatives include publishing this manual and hosting debtors’ assemblies; supporting the work of the Occupy Student Debt Campaign and their Pledge of Refusal; launching the “Rolling Jubilee,” a mutual-aid project that buys debt at steeply discounted prices and then abolishes it (to learn more, email [rollingjubilee@gmail.com](mailto:rollingjubilee@gmail.com)); and planning direct actions across the country, ranging from debt burnings to targeted shutdowns of predatory lenders of all kinds. (Prospects for Change, DROM: 110)

The confluence of specific projects, assemblies and organizations present in just this paragraph illustrates the kind of networked connectivity advocated within OWS’ theory journal, *Tidal*. Rejecting the authority of expertise, the manual calls for submissions from readers with additional ideas for, or knowledge about, resisting debt. The form of the manual and its free distribution invites autonomous action from individuals, families or collectives – offering resources to use or improve upon it at will. The end goal presented by DROM, of eliminating predatory debt institutions, is framed as liberation from “business as usual” and as

the opening of possibilities for social transformation.

### **The Manual of Economic Disobedience**

Of the fliers, pamphlets, and sundry other forms of activist-produced I was handed while camping in Barcelona's Plaça Catalunya, during the 1-year anniversary of the 15M *acampada*, one piece stuck out – both for its size (59 pages) and for its format. The fliers and more ephemeral kinds of literature in circulation tended to offer: either an analysis of the current political economic system, or an invitation to take part in an assembly or new commission. In contrast, the *Manual de Desobediencia Economica*, the Manual of Economic Disobedience (MDE) offered pages on pages of instructions and resources for going about individualized forms of direct action, synthesizing analysis and action, but with an indefinite relation to time, that is not proposing specific actions but offering tools for future actions. Given away in hard copy, and distributed for free online, the MDE had been produced by Derecho de Rebelión, a working group based mostly in Barcelona, but organized through the online networking platform *N-1*. Coordinating over the non-commercial, open-software social network, activists collated resources and articles and, like *Rebelaos*, received funding from donations to print 5,000 copies for distribution. Like the *Rebelaos*, articles are presented without authors beyond that of the collective. Unlike some of the activist-theorists within OWS, the writers of the *Manual de Desobediencia Economica* (MDE) have not shied away from employing the discourse of rights, as illustrated by the very name of the working group, Derecho de Rebelión (Right to Rebellion). Drawing their name and purpose from the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen,” the central text of the French Revolution, the manual argues that:

When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is for the people and for each segment of the people, the most sacred of its rights and the most indispensable of its duties (“Manifiesto” *Manual de Desobediencia Economica*: 8)

Citing the examples of Mohandas K. Gandhi, whose resistance to British imperialism centered on the idea of non-collaboration, and Henry David Thoreau, whose treatise *Civil Disobedience* is based on his time in jail for not paying taxes, the Derecho de Rebelión



manifesto calls for individuals to assert their sacred and natural “right to disobedience” - highlighting as well the historical legacy of tax resistance as a form of disobedience. Like OWS’ *Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual*, the *Manual de Desobediencia Economica* is divided into sections based on individual actions and collective actions, but ends with a more substantial third section detailing “alternatives to the system.”

The “individual actions” section includes discussion of steps for specific forms of insubordination towards IVA (value-added) and IRPF (personal income) taxes, as well as advice for dealing with bankruptcy and challenging debt. The “collective actions” section advocates the creation of working groups for researching “the legal validity” and implications of fiscal disobedience tactics and to establish, ongoing “cooperatives to protect autogestion from the actions of the bank and the state.” The final section, “Alternatives to the System,” contains sub-sections on topics like: “constructing a way of life at the margin of the current system”, “comprehensive public systems,” and “alternative financing.” It includes descriptions and contact information for various health, educational and agricultural collectives as well as larger networks of regional “comprehensive cooperatives” which connect smaller projects. One of the examples given, the Cooperativa Integral Catalana (or Catalan Integrated Cooperative), operates *Ca La Fou*, a self-managed “ecoindustrial postcapitalist colony” in rural Catalonia. The project has been funded in part by the “strategic insolvency” of one of the cooperative’s founding members, Enric Duran i Giralt. Often referred to as “Robin Banks” in mainstream media venues, Duran i Giralt was arrested in Spain in 2009 for refusing to make payments on 492,000 euros in loans taken out from 39 financial institutions, loans which Duran i Giralt claims have been used to help finance various undisclosed anticapitalist projects<sup>8</sup>. The authors identify projects like the Cooperativa Integral Catalana and the health and education collective Aurea Social that already exist (and helped fund the manual), and personal examples like that of Enric Duran i Giralt, and challenge readers to see these as the beginning of an admittedly difficult road ahead:

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<sup>8</sup> Garcia, Jesus “Una estafa antisistema” *El Pais* 16 May 2009  
[http://elpais.com/elpais/2009/05/16/actualidad/1242461820\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2009/05/16/actualidad/1242461820_850215.html)

As a people, if we organize ourselves, we can be capable of creating and defending spaces free of control and submission to power. When we succeed, power will not be blocked immediately, but will be forced to repress us and knock down our popular power to establish itself as the only legitimate power within its territory...As individual people, as human beings, we have in civil disobedience and in autogestion, two fundamental tools of political action. As a people organized in a massive form, we have the responsibility to make the world in which we are living, as we would like it to be. (Conclusiones y continuidad: las oficinas de desobediencia economica, MDE: 54)

In this configuration, disobedience makes space for projects of autogestion. The conceptualization of simultaneous, individual and collective modes of disobedience, paired with an immediate shift into already-existing, self-managed organizations, presents an integrated approach to forms of resistance that support each other as they occur at multiple, interacting scales. The manual itself: as a product of collective writing, printing and distribution reflects the larger project of mutually assisted desertion, the protests of a collective exodus from the current “system” and into nascent, alternative societies.

### **Manual-a-Manual: Where do OWS and 15M converge/diverge?**

*Rebelaos* is, from cover to cover, a call for building communities outside of formal politics. Such is not the case with *Tidal*, where not all of the writers within the OWS magazine have given up on the potential for social transformation through the state and existing institutions. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak concedes that, “in order to correct political economy, we cannot rely on politics alone,” but does not reject the state entirely. Calling for a global general strike, Spivak still insists on the possibility of pressuring forms of existing national and international authority to provide better regulatory laws for financial markets in order to hold capital accountable to the public (*Tidal* #3: 7-8). Spivak offers a reminder that the idea of complete, collective withdrawal is only one of numerous paths envisioned by theorists within OWS. While the disagreements contained within these texts would be viewed as contradictions within a more centralized, cohesive *movement*, disagreements underline the poly-vocal aspect of these mobilizations, the kind of diversity encouraged in the type of open-source organizing from which these documents come.

One of the more obvious differences between these texts is the greater number of alternative, economic projects *Rebelaos* and the *Manual de Desobediencia Economica* are able to offer as examples, as opposed to those texts from OWS. This may likely reflect the different material contexts in which these manuals have been produced. In Spain, the severity of unemployment, sudden and deep cuts to social programs, and sense that any national government will continue to be subordinate to the European Union's demands, has fostered a sense among many that things will likely not get better (at least not anytime soon) - a sentiment conveyed in the popular protest chant "No és crisi, és capitalisme," or "This is not a crisis, this is capitalism." In addition, Spanish activists have a very different set of historical examples to draw from, such as the aforementioned *Federación Anarquista Ibérica*, as well as more recent cooperative models, such as the Mondragon Corporation – a now decades-old federation of worker cooperatives based in the Basque Country of Spain. As a result, alternative economic projects at this point seem more visible Spain, as a familiar means by which many readers are already meeting some of their daily needs, whether in the form of time banks, barter markets or cooperatives<sup>9</sup>. By contrast, the *Debt Resistor's Operations Manual* restricts itself to walking the reader through legal, already-existing avenues for challenging debt. In *Tidal* we have a discussions of various sites of resistance (the Sunset Park Rent Strike, Stop 'Stop and Frisk' campaigns against the NYPD), things to fight *against*, but a kind of horizon emerges within the OWS literature beyond which it is hard to envision in any concrete terms what the positive content of alternatives to "the system" would look like, or how they would be put into practice. What we are left with is the argument that it needs to be brought down, and then afterwards we can decide how to replace it. Hardt and Negri in *Declaration* contrast this kind of "destituent" mode of resistance – refusal, economic withdrawal and the collapse of the old model – a thread shared by both mobilizations, with "constituent" processes, attempts to build new structures, more visible in the cooperative models referenced in the manuals and actions coming out of the 15M.

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<sup>9</sup> Eunjung Cha, Arian "In Spain, financial crisis feeds expansion of a parallel, euro-free economy" Washington Post, August 27, 2012 [[http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-08-27/business/35491219\\_1\\_single-currency-new-currency-euro](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-08-27/business/35491219_1_single-currency-new-currency-euro)]

Lee Quinby's critique of the "endism" or millennialist tendency within Hardt and Negri's earlier *Empire* seems to resonate with this "deconstituent" strand present in the journal and manual from Occupy Wall Street. "The problem with such a belief" Quinby points out, "is that, over and over again historically, it has stirred people toward demonization, stereotyping, and scapegoating of perceived enemies and romanticized violence in the name of justified revenge. As with any Grand Narrative, millennialism tends to homogenize diversity and totalize complexity through binary oppositions" (Quinby 2004: 232). The division of the 99% against the 1% that OWS has drawn upon can be seen as performing in this way, obscuring diversity within the movement, but more importantly externalizing the problems of inequality and injustice, projecting them onto an enemy that, if we could only get rid of, we could be free. In *Tidal* and the *Debt Resistor's Operations Manual* the reader is told of the potential of refusal as a means of resistance, but is left with a much less developed picture of what an alternative way of living might look like, let alone how persisting forms of inequality will be addressed, themes which are to a greater degree discussed within the "constituent" emphasis on building other visions of society through the affinity groups and minimum consensus models of the 15M periodical and manual.

Finally, between the two mobilizations we can see a discrepancy similar to the difference Deleuze and Guattari have described between "molecular" and "molar" formations, here in regard to how organization has taken place and how social change is being proposed (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The central example Occupy/Strike Debt's manual offers, as an illustration of its principles and tactics in action, is the Rolling Jubilee. Buying anonymous medical debt from secondary markets in order to "abolish it," the Rolling Jubilee project has so far been able to cancel over \$11 million in debt<sup>10</sup> through a running collection now totaling over \$500,000 in donations. As the Rolling Jubilee webpage proclaims: "Together we can liberate debtors at random through a campaign of mutual support, good will, and collective refusal. Debt resistance is just the beginning. Join us as we imagine and

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<sup>10</sup> as of April 2013

create a new world based on the common good, not Wall Street profits.<sup>11</sup>” Although the Rolling Jubilee is presented as a “mutual aid” project, the donors and recipients remain anonymous to each other, partly as a result of the way in which debts are bundled together and sold to collection agencies, but also as a product of the aggregating process of collecting donations through a singular point of redistribution. The form of participation and relationships Strike Debt and OWS facilitate, while benefiting many, operates through a centralized amassing of resources, a molar consolidation that solidifies and perpetuates the need for its own persistence as an organization, to continue managing incoming funds. In a similar sense, although *Tidal* has in many ways opened up theory production to more and newer participants, its emergence as the pre-eminent theory journal of OWS has meant that it serves as the most audible discussion of theory within the mobilization. The persistence of the Strike Debt group and the Occupy “brand” through the *Debt Resistor’s Operations Manual* and into the Rolling Jubilee campaign has meant a continuation through some of the same organizations and individuals, of these debt resistance projects.

Through the examples of the 15M provided, a much messier situation is revealed. The collective that produced *Rebelaos* is now defunct, though some of the members continue to work in other projects, such as the *Cooperativa Integral Catalana*. This one-off production model is not exceptional, but consistent with the values of affinity and minimum consensus-based organizing: having researched, written, printed and distributed their intended product, the organization was dissolved. Derecho de Rebelión, the collective that produced the *Manual de Desobediencia Económica* was deactivated after the distribution of the manual, but has recently been reactivated as of March 2013 for a new fiscal disobedience campaign, in which updated versions of manuals (plural) will be written, funded and distributed “in parallel” and in “diverse territories”<sup>12</sup> such that information for ongoing projects to take part in will be as relevant for local contexts as possible. This more dispersed, shifting model of constant coming-together and dispersal is more similar to the molecular formations described by

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<sup>11</sup> <http://rollingjubilee.org/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.derechoderebelion.net/reactivacion-campana-redaccion-contenidos-manual-de-desobediencia-economica-2013-2/>

Deleuze and Guattari, where flux and not stability is valued, and social change is imagined shifting between ever-smaller (and harder to measure) scales.

### **Re-calibrating the Protest Studies Toolkit**

The contributions of the numerous activist-theorists whose work is discussed in this paper offer interventions into at least three overlapping issues of protest practice and corresponding assumptions that have shaped the analysis of social movements and collective action, namely: scale, stability, and success.

A number of the articles discussed take on the common tendency among those who look at protest and social movements to consider tactics effective when change becomes visible at the state level - when a government is toppled or takes a new form. Movement growth, the scaling-up of collective action or organization, is portrayed as not only good, but as necessary for qualifying a mobilization as successful. But need this be the case? More importantly, what do we miss by defaulting to the research unit of the nation-state? As Raúl Zibechi points out:

Organizing on the basis of modes of everyday life is slow, and using it to make decisions can be a time consuming process. It probably can't be exercised much beyond local groups, where there is a lot of personal trust and many small, everyday interests in common. So I do not think it is a perfect paradigm for opposing large bureaucracies but it is, nevertheless, a way that thousands of grassroots groups have found to resist autonomously (Zibechi 2012: 309).

In the contexts of OWS and the 15M especially, activists seem increasingly willing to embrace the smallness of local assemblies and affinity groups, at the expense of large-scale visibility. If the economic crisis is - as many within these texts have claimed - the result of a crisis of representation, and people feeling that they have little or no control over the processes that shape their lives, then finding ways in which individuals can participate more fully might *require* moving to smaller scales of organization and staying there. If this were the case, and if we are to take protesters' own goals seriously, then these smaller scale interactions would be where social scientists would need to be focusing their attention, which would not require disregarding any potential, aggregate changes at state or regional levels.

Recent scholarship on collective action has more adequately addressed this mode of change. Asef Bayat's concept of a "nonmovement" – quiet, small changes whose net effect is widespread social change, offers a useful conceptual tool for describing the proposed phenomena of the 15M and OWS. In *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Bayat argues that the repressive legacy of authoritarian governments in the Middle East has meant that most social change occurs slowly, through dispersed and individualized direct actions, rather than cohesive, large-scale social movements as in the case of Latin America. Because would-be activists often lack the political opportunities to come together, individuals are forced to act in isolated ways, "quietly encroaching" upon the boundaries of what is permitted. Seeking "the redistribution of social goods" and "autonomy," Bayat's "marginals tend to function as much as possible outside the boundaries of the state and modern bureaucratic institutions, basing their relationships on reciprocity, trust and negotiation" (Bayat 2010: 59). The 15M and OWS publications argue, in a similar manner, that opportunities for significant political change are not available. Unlike the women, young people, and squatters Bayat discusses, the participants of the 15M and OWS mobilizations have some opportunities to come together and develop popular, oppositional subjectivities. However, the insulation of political decision-making, attributed to the "dictatorship of the market," as opposed to explicit, authoritarian rule, has made 99% of the population marginal (in the OWS imaginary), resulting in the convergence of analyses by activists within these disparate contexts such that small-scale everyday actions are seen as the most effective means of extracting oneself and one's community from neoliberal subjugation, and constructing other forms of sociality.

The modes of protest through withdrawal advocated in both settings also break in significant ways from the kinds of sustained movements that have sought to build power over time. As Marina Sitrin has noted, participants in OWS and 15M, many inspired by earlier experiments in Argentina, have sought to cultivate an ethic of self-management (or autogestion), using forms of political and economic boycott targeting the moral economy as

well as the cash economy (Sitrin 2012). Rather than targeting political institutions, or even building their own alternative political institutions, activists envision themselves as changing their daily practices in such a way as to create new and more resilient “movement fields,” webs of meaning and material relations that would be able to continuously generate new projects through conversations between autonomous sites of resistance (Alvarez et al 2012). The material focus on withdrawal, present in both OWS and 15M, seems to offer something different from the Gramscian project of building sustained power to challenge the hegemonic neoliberal state, as well as the recognition orientation of many of the “new social movements.” Activist-theorists within Occupy Wall Street and the 15M have taken elements of the traditional social movement repertoire, particularly the boycott and general strike, and integrated them into an affinity or minimum-consensus based framework, one that embraces difference while holding on to the possibility of collective action, albeit at the cost of stability. This move might help us reflect on any assumptions that stability is inherently positive or required for substantial social change. As writer Suzahn E. argues, “A stable world is not necessarily a just world” (Suzahn E. “An Occupier’s Note” *Tidal* 1: 7). Restricting the emergence of fixed institutions maintains the constant uncertainty of a continuous re-shuffling of articulations between smaller groups, but it also provides a means for avoiding the kind of alienation that activists decry in current political economic configurations. For researchers, this means that the most visible, and most lasting configurations/collectives/organizations might not be the most impactful or most important to study, but rather the movement fields from which initiatives emerge and recede.

A question worth considering in more detail is whether a minimum consensus model as proposed in *Rebelaos* would substantially break from the demands of the liberal, public sphere that Habermas’ discusses and Nancy Fraser critiques with the idea of “bracketing?” (Fraser 1993). In the liberal public sphere, individuals are expected to “bracket” their differentiating qualities and affiliations, and to approach debate as rational agents. In the minimum consensus version proposed by theorists in the 15M, differences are to be asserted -



and made explicit - in order for individuals and/or collectives to identify with whom they can find enough common cause to work together. The difference between these networks and the state model is the assertion of autonomy: not only the freedom to associate but to dis-associate at will. In the earlier, general assembly models of both OWS and the 15M this was not the case. The desire to create a unified body in the form of a singular assembly put pressure on individuals to compromise in order to take part in the process. The potential of infinite and recurring opportunities for aggregation and disaggregation makes compromise less of an imperative. What makes this difference possible is the concession of scale and stability – by no longer seeking to speak for all of the 99%, or seeking to replace the nation-state or the city, but rather to build up from unstable affinity groups on an as-needed basis, these texts call for a different kind of sovereignty than that which existed even in the non-hierarchical occupations of the plazas. The popular sovereignty of the plaza occupations and the popular subjectivities made possible through the idea of the 99% and the generalized *indignado* proved useful in the form of negative, reactive subjectivities, but become meaningless in the hypothetical event of successful escape from neoliberal governance. For this reason it seems desirable, and theoretically possible, that a minimum consensus model would allow participants to develop and hold onto their own beliefs and reservations, although what such a model would look like in practice, what material limitations and constraints would come with that kind of messy, unstable social organization have not yet been the subject of much academic scholarship. For this reason, further study of less-stable political configurations as they seek to change individual subjectivities, can contribute to our understanding of the trade-offs of varying levels of stability, and challenge the assumption that stability is a desirable goal in the first place.

Following this mass withdrawal conception of collective, political action, what “successful” political change looks like is not the amassing of forces, but a collective refusal and dispersion, the hemorrhaging of people and resources, over time, from what is referred to by both groups as “the system,” into small-scale community projects of “mutual aid” - a move

that depends on a re-configuration of the moral economy related to what our responsibilities should be to each other. While the Spanish publications go further in piecing together an image of a post-state and post-capitalist society, both the Spanish and US cases seek to redefine what type of governance is permissible. Both reject debt as an individualizing form of subjugation, and seek to re-define it as the starting place for a potentially revolutionary subjectivity. In rejecting debt, we can begin to imagine what forms the future political should take. The emphasis on producing “manuals” offers an interesting turn away from a singular, coherent “social movement” and towards a do-it-yourself form of mass social change, in which participation in large-scale assemblies is no longer necessary, or even desirable. More time spent in public demonstrations means less time involved in other projects. Accepting this view, the current lack of people in the street would not necessarily be a signal of decline, but could be seen as the dispersal of attention to more localized and issue-specific projects: neighborhood assemblies, anti-debt campaigns, storm-relief efforts, etc.

In the Spanish case, the potential reconfiguration of social life into voluntary, task-based aggregations redefines at what scale political organization would re-emerge. The building of intentional communities, imagined as an alter-civic, or really, a multitude of alter-civics, denies a singular definition of the civic. What qualities make up a civil society, are to be negotiated and renegotiated, in local assemblies, by those who belong to each community. Activists advocating withdrawal from both the political and economic entanglements of the neoliberal state are in some sense responding to the conceptualization that it is not just the state, but also civil society that “disciplines subjects, regulates practices and brings forth political rationalities, moving us beyond the notion that movements resist governmentality while states promote it” (Alvarez et al 2012: 16-17). Having declared the current form of the state as un-civic, activists are now attempting to construct alternative civic spheres in which the state, as it exists now, has no place, in which the ethics of being-in-resistance and the self-reorganization of daily lives circumscribe how political power can be constituted. In their own words:

“We hope this Tidal ignites new conversations and deepens older ones amongst each other, in our assemblies, working groups, caucuses, universities, town halls, union halls, bars, bus stops, subway cars, shelters, dinner tables, and workplaces, in every spaces [sic] we occupy. The stakes are high enough that the conversations should happen everywhere. And perhaps the coming year will be the moment when we are unleashed beyond a ‘movement’ and towards a new way of being” (“Theory. Strategy. Action.” Editor’s note, Tidal #2)

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