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NoVo: New Wave on a Broken Foundation

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NoVo: A New Wave on a Broken Foundation

Senior Project Submitted to the
Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

By
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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This paper is dedicated to Peter Buffett. Try Harder.

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Introduction

One of the reasons I decided to focus my research on Kingston is that it reminds me of home. I grew up in Oakland, California, at a time when the city's demographics were rapidly changing. Oakland was experiencing a cultural explosion and was shifting from its old reputation as dangerous and unsafe to its current reputation as a hub for arts and culture. Of course, Oakland has always been a hub for arts and culture, but as it became more recognized by mainstream, white society, wealthier white people started moving there. What interested me most was the connection between the shift in demographics in Oakland and the shift in the way it was perceived to outsiders. Gentrification happened in Oakland as its image became more tied to arts, food, and culture that appealed to white people. Kingston is experiencing a similar moment right now, but there is one big difference. Kingston has recently acquired its own local millionaire benefactor, Peter Buffett.

In an era of global change Buffett is attempting to serve Kingston by modernizing philanthropy, using his foundation to experiment with new ways of thinking about charity. Buffett presents himself as a progressive environmentalist concerned with the development of a rural city. But the impact of many of the programs he funds and the policies he champions may unintentionally worsen the effects of gentrification. As in Oakland, gentrification is one of the main drivers of inequality in Kingston, and one of the hardest to stop. Gentrification is a social problem that arises because of the movement of progressive white people, like Buffett, whose arrival drives up housing costs as they enjoy natural food, beautiful scenery, and lively culture. Can a gentrifier like Buffett really help stabilize Kingston's rapidly changing housing market, or will he simply perpetuate more inequality under the guise of progressivism? As a former clueless

white gentrifier myself, I knew I needed a way to hear the voices of the people most involved in this system. To that end I center this project around interviews with local activists, to understand how they feel about this change to their work and their community. I will use these perspectives to inform my examination of NoVo's approach to reformist philanthropy, both in how it succeeds in supporting truly radical local activism, and where it falls into neoliberal reforms that reaffirm existing systems of oppression. In this essay I will explore the variety of effects that NoVo has on the way activist groups operate in Kingston, to determine how we can expand NoVo's reforms in order to better serve those in need and slow the process of gentrification.

The History of Kingston, NY

Kingston, New York, is a small city almost exactly one hundred miles north of New York City. The original capital of New York, Kingston has gone through more than a few ups and downs throughout its history. Originally known primarily for its port on the Hudson, which leads to sheltered Rondout Creek, Kingston provided much of the material used in building New York City. The Delaware & Hudson canal, which started in Pennsylvania on the Delaware river and ended in Rondout Creek, was in operation from 1828 to 1898. This 70-year period roughly coincided with Kingston's boom and its end with a bust in materials and manufacturing and thus in Kingston's economy. (Berelowitz & Blauweiss 2022, 38-42) Much of the brick, cement, and bluestone used in the construction of New York City, including much of the Brooklyn Bridge, was shipped from Kingston. However, as railroads took over from canals, New Yorkers began getting their building supplies from cheaper manufacturers farther away (Berelowitz & Blauweiss 2022, 47) In 1907 the Ashokan Reservoir was completed to provide water to New York City. It became the last large industrial project in the area as the financial panic of the same year caused industry to slow (Berelowitz & Blauweiss 2022, 94). Kingston suffered another

blow fifty years later in the 1960's in the form of Urban Renewal. The federal government sponsored the nearly complete destruction of the Rondout district, which had been home to many of the workers in the manufactories during Kingston's heyday. Much of midtown was dismantled as well, and new stores were built in a shopping center on the north side of Kingston as a replacement. Those whose homes were destroyed by Urban Renewal programs were often not fairly compensated and had trouble finding new homes, a problem especially prevalent for the Black community during the peak of redlining. (Blauweiss and Berelowitz pp. 123-4) Luckily, Kingston was sustained by an IBM factory that moved to the area and employed "7,100 people at its peak in the mid-1980s." (Blauweiss and Berelowitz 116) However, the damage done by the redevelopment of Kingston was done in spite of the new jobs, and when IBM left in 1995, Kingston once again entered an economic slump that it was only beginning to recover from when the pandemic struck and Kingston's economy was severely damaged once again.

In addition to its history of manufacturing and supplying building materials, Kingston and the greater Hudson Valley have been a tourist destination for the wealthy of New York City since the 1800s. Initially populated with the second homes of wealthy families and the Hudson River School of painters (Blauweiss and Berelowitz p 32), the area has experienced boom and bust cycles of tourism similar to that of manufacturing. Tourism had its first peak in the 1830s, when reduced prices of transportation and lodging opened travel up to the middle class (Gassan 2014, 10). Tourism peaked again in the 1960s with a huge population of motels where guests could swim in pools, explore the natural beauty, or take in a show. Many of these new motels were part of the "borscht belt," a group of motels that served Jewish New Yorkers who were not welcome at many other resorts and required kosher food (Levine 2014). Nearly all of these vacation destinations have gone derelict over the years. But Kingston has been

experiencing a revitalization of the tourism industry recently as more wealthy New Yorkers have begun to come up for an escape from city life Kingston itself has been actively courting Brooklynites who were interested in moving upstate since at least 2019, through sponsored news articles and events with free food in Brooklyn (Brownstoner 2019). Kingston's appeal skyrocketed during the COVID 19 pandemic as New Yorkers moved up to escape the close quarters of their apartments and their jobs moved online. Kingston became such a popular destination for New York City expats that it was the hottest real estate market in the country for a short period during the summer of 2021(Spectrum, 2021). Hudson valley scholars Nevarez and Simmons who study this process of "Brooklynization" describe how "Kingston demonstrates the latest, market-driven momentum of amenity development in a region whose small cities and ... rural landscapes are "on the map" of metropolitan visitors. Unlike Beacon and Hudson, this city has no single destination-level amenity, trading instead on a reputation as a "hidden" small city with historic architecture (as the state's first capital) and contemporary cool" (Nevarez & Simmons, 2019, 23). Kingston's reputation as hidden is representative of its rising star among wealthy New Yorkers, who enjoy the exclusivity.

Who is Peter Buffet and what is a NoVo?

Peter Buffett is a philanthropist for a new generation. His father, Warren Buffett, is a real estate magnate, investor, and one of the wealthiest men in the world. Peter is a trained musician who has won a Midwest Emmy award, put out dozens of albums, scored movies, and written plays. Peter has a specific passion for Native Americans and has written multiple plays with Native American collaborators about indigenous myths (<https://www.peterbuffett.com>). Warren Buffett has given vast sums of money to his children on a few occasions, but in 2006 Warren gave each of his three children one billion dollars' worth of Berkshire-Hathaway shares that they

were to use for their own charitable good works. Peter took this money and used it to transform his Spirit Foundation (which he had started with a meager \$100,000 pledge from his father) into The NoVo foundation (novofoundation.org). In the ensuing years NoVo focused on uplifting women of color, until it drastically shifted its focus in 2013 by purchasing long standing Gil Farm just outside of Kingston, which would become the Farm Hub, while abandoning plans to build a women's center in New York City (Marek 2020). The Farm Hub has since become the base of operations for many of NoVo's philanthropic ventures. In 2020, the Farm Hub donated 300,000 pounds of produce to emergency food services in and around Kingston (Farm Hub, 2020) NoVo also funds and operates a variety of programs in Kingston, including the community radio station, Radio Kingston, The Current (a new currency for Kingstonians), a laundromat, a food co-op, and a community center. In addition to these new institutions, NoVo has donated \$140,000,000 in total to nonprofits and organizations in the Hudson Valley between 2017 and 2019.

Peter Buffett views himself as a different type of philanthropist, he eschews the market focused and prescriptive views of most large charitable foundations, instead priding himself on his ability to create local projects with input from his community. In a 2013 article for the New York Times he described modern charity as “conscience laundering—feeling better about accumulating more than any one person could possibly need to live on by sprinkling a little around as an act of charity.” Instead of just doing philanthropy to calm his guilty conscience, Peter claims he gives with the goal of “trying out concepts that shatter current structures and systems that have turned much of the world into one vast market.” Peter says that it is the duty of philanthropists to take risks and try new things, to break out of our current “vast market” paradigm. This assertion is central to the questions of this paper. What does it mean for change to

be truly transformative? Can the changes that Peter Buffett is seeking to make in Kingston truly shift the world away from being a “vast market,” or is he just another rich white man who is “conscience laundering?” He would certainly be in good company, as conscience laundering, and the justification of violence have been the function of foundations since their inception in the United States.

Philanthropy in the United States and The Nonprofit Industrial Complex

Charitable foundations have existed in the United States for over a century. Charities began to organize in the U.S. after the civil war, prior to which charity was primarily an individual affair. As the U.S. industrialized and urbanized, issues of poverty and violence became more visible and centralized. The concentration of wealth in charities expanded in order to meet growing needs. These early charitable organizations “focused on individual poverty rather than poverty on the systemic level. Charities did not campaign for higher wages, for instance, but worked to ameliorate the impact of low wages on communities.” (Smith, 2007, 3). Later, the first charitable foundations were created by “multimillionaire robber barons, such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Russell Sage, [who] created new institutions that would exist in perpetuity and support charitable giving in order to shield their earnings from taxation.” (Smith, 2007, 4) These foundations were established to protect both the wealth and reputations of these new capitalists, who could protect their money while saving face and downplaying their heinous business practices. As foundations grew and received more and more donations, there was also “a huge swell in the number of nonprofit organizations.” (Smith, 2007, 4) The rise of foundations, “accompanied the rise of groups that organized as formal 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations because foundations could make tax-deductible donations to non-profits.” Nonprofits are defined by the IRS as “ ‘religious, charitable, scientific, or educational’

organizations whose receipts are tax-exempt, and whose contributions are tax deductible.’ ”
(Smith, 2007, 6) Foundations and their nonprofit offspring experienced a lull as a result of the Great Depression and following the creation of the welfare state as part of the New Deal, but came back with a vengeance around the late 60s and 70s.

The current “wave” of philanthropy is considered by Jennifer Wolch to be imbricated within what she calls the shadow state, which is “constituted by a network of institutions that do much of what government agencies are supposed to do with tax money in the areas of education and social services.” (Smith, 2007, 9) This replacement of government services “is the resolution of two historical waves: the unprecedented expansion of government agencies and services (1933-1973), followed by an equally wide-scale attempt to undo many of those programs at all levels-federal, state, county, local.” (Gilmore, 2007, 45) As the push for austerity grew in the 80’s many conservatives saw the potential for transferring social services to private operations. The shadow state refers to how nonprofits are given the responsibility of caring for marginalized people without being given any control, existing in the shadow of government nonprofit requirements. Stricter requirements for recipients and privatization became the norm for social services in the U.S. overtime as “Antistate state actors welcomed non-profits under the rhetoric of efficiency (read: meager budgets) and accountability (read: contracts could be pulled if anybody stepped out of line).” (Gilmore, 2007, 45) As funding was cut to programs like Food Stamps, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Medicare, and Medicaid, more nonprofits stepped in to fill the gap. This shadow state exists within the larger Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC), defined by Dylan Rodriguez as "a set of symbiotic relationships that link together political and financial technologies of state and owning class proctorship with surveillance over public political intercourse, including and especially emergent progressive and

leftist social movements." (Rodríguez, 2007, 21-2) The NPIC is the set of machinery in and around the shadow state like universities, public policy institutes, and contractors, as well as the connections these institutions have to other industrial complexes—specifically the military and prisons. An industrial complex is a set of material and social relations that are considered part of everyday life, such that it becomes difficult to imagine a world without it, such as the military, the police, or nonprofits. “Thus, normalization slips into naturalization, and people imagine that locking folks in cages or bombing civilians or sending generation after generation off to kill somebody else's children is all part of ‘human nature.’” (Gilmore, 2007, 43) Because the NPIC has become normalized the shadow state has become how we as a society provide people with what they need.

Because the responsibility for providing housing, food, and health care to people who need it has shifted from the government to nonprofits, and because government and foundation contracts can be so restrictive, many nonprofits find themselves stuck in contracts that only provide enough money to continue providing services. This often becomes an obstacle to creating change as nonprofits often find themselves unable to increase their capacity to provide services or to challenge the systems of exploitation that create these disparities in the first place. These problems of insufficient funding and inability to challenge the status quo are deeply intertwined, but many of my sources use the term “systemic” to refer to both movement and institution building and activism that addresses social problems directly. We can elaborate on this distinction using Paul Kivel’s definitions of Social Service and Social Change “Social service work addresses the needs of individuals reeling from the personal and devastating impact of institutional systems of exploitation and violence. Social change work challenges the root causes

of the exploitation and violence.” (Incite 129) One of these methods is not better than the other, and we should question the effectiveness and goals of both.

Social Service and Social Change

Social service work faces a variety of obstacles. Many social service programs are either folded into government programs or serve as replacements for them. It is important to question whether social service work is uplifting people and reducing the stress of their lives or supporting existing “hostile systems—like health care systems designed around profit, not keeping people healthy, or food and transportation systems that pollute the earth and poison people.” (Spade, 2020, 12). In addition to relying on damaging systems, many “poverty-focused and homelessness-focused nonprofits are essentially encouraged to merely manage poor people: provide limited and conditional access to prison-like shelters and make people take budgeting classes or prove their sobriety” (Spade, 2020, 22). These conditional programs are designed to give people just enough to survive but not enough to change their life situation, while also reifying hierarchies of deservingness in which “the most vulnerable people are left behind: those who were up-charged by cops and prosecutors, those who do not have the means to prove their innocence, those who do not match cultural tropes of innocence and deservingness. This narrow focus actually strengthens the system’s legitimacy by advocating that the targeting of those more stigmatized people is okay” (Spade, 2020, 16). When we look at systems that purport to serve marginalized people, we need to analyze them in the context of the cultural and social markers that are created and used to identify who deserves support and how they get it.

Social change work is a bit more nebulous. Of course, social change and social service can go hand-in-hand and are often dependent on each other. The more people can take care of themselves, the more time they have to look at their world, see how messed up it is, and try to fix

it. The goal of social change work is to change the structure of society. In a capitalist world “We are put in competition with each other for survival, and we are forced to rely on hostile systems—like health care systems designed around profit, not keeping people healthy, or food and transportation systems that pollute the earth and poison people—for the things we need” (Spade, 2020, 11). Acknowledging that many of the systems within and connected to the shadow state and the NPIC are designed to be vectors of oppression, one of the most important challenges of social change work is not reformist, because most social service systems are deeply imbricated with systems of oppression. We should be wary about social change programs that naturalize systems of oppression by determining that the best method of change is reforming those systems.

Methodology

This essay was written with the assistance of anonymous interlocutors interviewed during the 2022-2023 school year in Kingston, NY. Because of the sensitivity of these issues and the localized nature of this research, all of my interlocutors and their organizations will remain anonymous. I found these interlocutors using snowball sampling and conducted an approximately hour-long interview with each of them. I have also used the data collected by the local Kingston paper “The Daily Freeman,” which contains NoVo’s donations in the Hudson Valley between 2017 and 2020 (Kirby, 2021). NoVo does donate to projects outside of Greater Hudson Valley, but including these would extend this paper beyond its subject matter. For brevity’s sake, when I refer to NoVo donations, I am referring to its expenditures in the Hudson Valley between 2017 and 2020. The first chapter will introduce the reforms that NoVo is attempting to make to the foundation structure, and where they have succeeded in making philanthropy more responsive or equitable. Investments in large capital projects make NoVo’s

work much more focused on the long term than that of many other organizations, while their reformed grant initiatives give nonprofits more freedom. The second chapter details the contradictions with this approach to philanthropy, as well as how it may be contributing to gentrification in Kingston. While many of NoVo's policies are focused on reforming the foundation system and the non-profit industrial complex, they do not entirely succeed in remedying the systemic issues that are proliferated by the foundation system. The third chapter offers an analysis of the racial, social, and cultural dimensions that define our current paradigm of philanthropy and how they reinforce existing systems of oppression. It explores how NoVo pushes a reformist view of social change that supports white supremacy, even while claiming to be a liberal institution. Finally, I conclude by offering a way forward through methods of organizing that are more broad based and explore the possibilities of truly radical philanthropy that works for the people, and against its own interests.

Ch 1: New Wave

NoVo's innovations on the traditional foundation model are an attempt to bring an out of touch model developed in the 1920s into the modern era by creating new systems. “We know that this current moment has been created by a complex set of entangled systems that have subjugated, oppressed and ignored many for the benefit of the few. And continuing divisions—through political, social and economic means—only fuel the furthering of centralized power” (NoVo). Novo tries to focus on new systems work, which means creating positive systems that will right the inequities between the many and the few. Peter and Jennifer Buffett went on a world tour before forming NoVo and while traveling they saw that “Strong patterns became clear all based on systems of domination, competition, and exploitation. They looked for ways to support changes that fostered greater collaboration and partnership in all spheres of life.” (NoVo, n.d.) The Buffetts saw global systems whose behavior led to negative outcomes for their human elements. By fostering greater interconnectedness, they hope to change the behavior of systems from destructive to productive.

How does NoVo Spend its ~~Peter Buffett's Warren Buffet's~~ My Money?

NoVo seeks to produce lasting systemic change by building sustainable institutions in Kingston that will replace the destructive systems that pre-dated them. Much of this systems work is focused on the creation of a sustainable local economy, with a focus on equitable food systems. NoVo's largest investment is in the Hudson Valley Farm Hub, which has already provided 300,000 pounds of food to the Kingston community and is the recipient of almost half of the approximately \$140,000,000 that NoVo has dedicated to the Hudson Valley. In fact, NoVo's five highest recipients of funding make up almost three quarters of all its expenditures. The Hudson Valley Farm Hub and Radio Kingston are both impressive projects.

The Farm Hub offers job training programs, provides free food, conducts research projects, and holds community events. Unlike most of the organizations NoVo funds, it is a direct subsidiary of NoVo and is possibly the most positive example of its philosophy at work. The Farm Hub serves as a way to combine service distribution with community building and infrastructure building. Each year the Farm Hub provides “hundreds of thousands of pounds of produce, the majority of which is used to supply local produce and value-added goods within the local emergency feeding system” (Farm Hub, 2020).

Radio Kingston functions similarly, providing a variety of services to the Kingston community. Radio Kingston is first and foremost a community radio station, hoping to “offer a chance for all residents to engage, listen to, and learn from each other” (<https://radiokingston.org/en/about>). Reviving community radio is a novel approach to local community building, especially in “a time of growing polarization, media consolidation, privatization and exploitation of community resources that threaten the basic fabric of local communities” (<https://radiokingston.org/en/about>). Radio Kingston also supports community events and has a community fund that provides up to \$500 a year to “community members in immediate need of financial assistance” (<https://radiokingston.org/en/content/community-fund>). Although Radio Kingston is not technically a subsidiary of NoVo, as the Farm Hub is, Peter Buffett is one of its three directors and NoVo is its main source of funding.

Another of NoVo’s largest projects, The Pine Street Health Center, “is expected to serve 8,000 to 10,000 patients of all ages per year, regardless of insurance status or ability to pay, its creators say” (Kirby, 2021). Ground was broken for the center in 2021, but there has been no estimated completion date announced yet. A number of NoVo’s largest funding recipients are

community building organizations. The YMCA is likely familiar to anyone who has lived in a city, but NoVo has put special effort, and \$325,000 into a flourishing YMCA farm project. NoVo has given \$6 million to United Way and Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley to distribute to other charitable organizations, but I was unable to determine from tax records where that money was distributed. NoVo has also donated to the Cornell Cooperative Extension, a program of Cornell University's agriculture program, which operates in every county in New York. They offer community resources, hold events, do research, provide information to the community, and run the local 4-H program in Ulster County. The County of Ulster receives donations from NoVo for specific projects but not for general services (novofoundation.org). NoVo also donates to Bard, primarily to support La Voz, a local Spanish language magazine, and the Kingston Housing Lab, a research program on housing that inspired much of the research for this project. The Omega Institute, another NoVo recipient, will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

When looked at as a whole these programs represent almost an almost \$120,000,000 investment in Kingston and the Greater Hudson Valley, primarily in infrastructure and community resources. The YMCA, Radio Kingston, and La Voz all represent spaces where community members can share information and interact. Pine Street, Cornell Cooperative, and the Farm Hub all represent huge investments in supporting people's basic needs, hopefully taking the strain off existing support systems. These 10 recipients overall represent a serious investment in community building and infrastructure development. NoVo is hoping to help build a Kingston where everybody is valued, and everyone gets what they need. Unlike many foundations, which focus on advocacy, policy, or legislation, NoVo is seeking to build infrastructure that will support people in their daily lives and help bring together the local community.

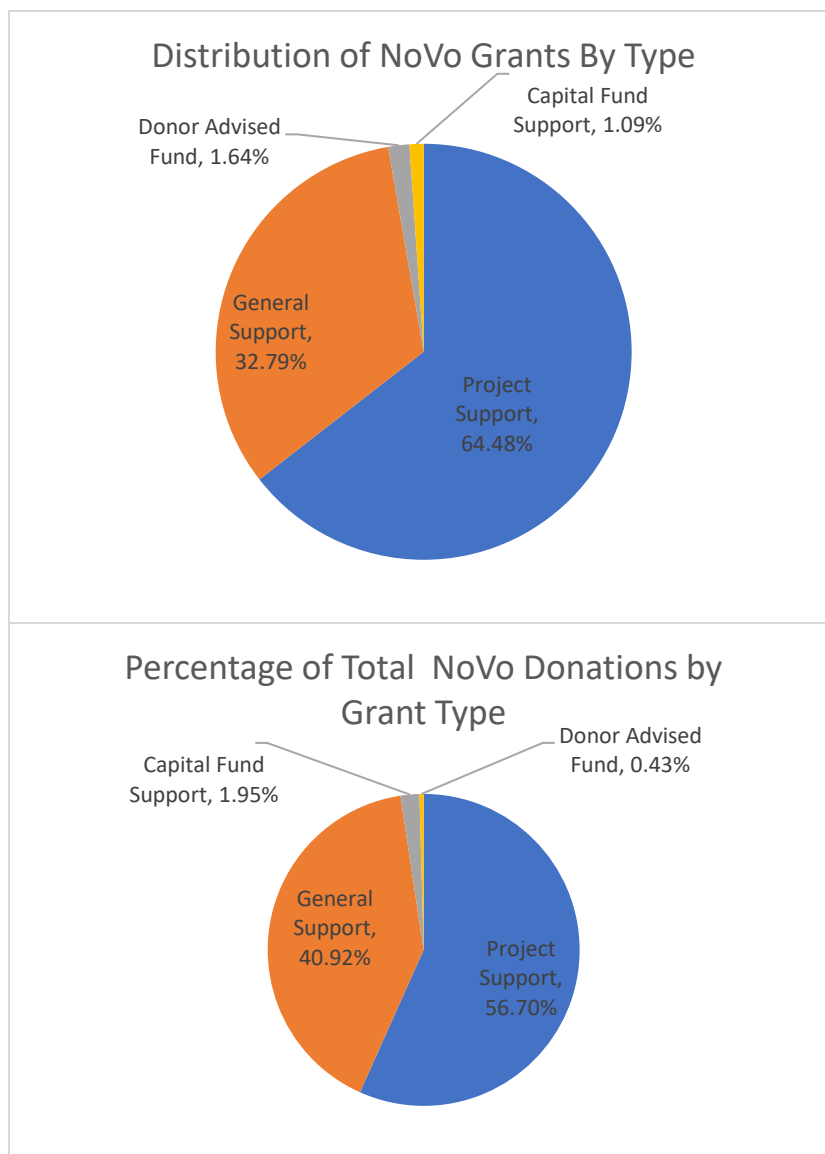
The other 61 organizations funded by NoVo are mostly 501(c)(3)s, with a few government institutions like the city of Kingston, a few private corporations like the Kingston Food Coop, and a variety of schools and churches, which are nonprofits but not 501(c)(3)s, thrown in. These organizations represent the remaining 17% of NoVo's donations, totaling about \$24 million in donations. I'll talk about a few in detail, but they run the gamut of environmentalism, public policy, social services, art, community building, and education. The average donation per year for these organizations is about \$100,000.

When Buffett talks about systemic change, he is referring to the creation of systems that do not feed into global capitalism. Buffett also decries technological schemes of development often put forward by neoliberal institutions. "Money should be spent trying out concepts that shatter current structures and systems that have turned much of the world into one vast market. Is progress really Wi-Fi on every street corner? No. It's when no 13-year-old girl on the planet gets sold for sex" (Buffett NYT). Here Buffett is putting emphasis on creating systems that lead to meaningful changes rather than symbolic or surface level ones. The internet is an important system for people to have access to, but Buffett implies that its primary purpose is to more tightly entangle people with global capitalism. Human trafficking, on the other hand, is a system arising from one of the foundational elements of global capitalism: dehumanization and enslavement. While Wi-Fi is great, Buffett wants us to focus more on the pressing human issues facing our world rather than things that simply make us more productive. When people ask "What's the ROI," (Buffett NYT) about charitable endeavors they are putting capitalist efficiency ahead of human lives. Buffett wants to direct NoVo funding where it really matters, not where it will make the greatest returns.

Relaxed Grant Requirements and Capacity Building

One of NoVo's most notable deviations from the standard nonprofit approach is its lack of requirements for funding. Most large foundations have strict requirements for how their funding is to be used. As I mentioned earlier, the conditions for work within the shadow state are always strictly regulated and underfunded. One of my interlocutors was impressed with the flexibility that NoVo offered their organization. "They don't provide restrictive boundaries as to where the money can go. It's kind of like a blank check, which is really unheard of. In that way there are a lot of nonprofits in the area that could not be functioning if there were operative restrictions. I guess that's the bridge they're trying to gap. Yes, they're still part of the nonprofit industrial complex. Yes, they're still a giant foundation. But they are, you know, really attempting to provide money to organizations that are helping." NoVo offers nonprofits much more creativity in their work than other nonprofits. In fact, my interlocutor suspects that many organizations would have to change the way they operate if NoVo funding dried up. These restrictions, usually tied to how and when funding must be used, are identified by Ruth Wilson Gilmore as one of the key problems plaguing grassroots nonprofits: "the work people set out to accomplish is vulnerable to becoming mission impossible under the sternly specific funding rubrics and structural prohibitions ... In particular, the modest amount of money that goes to grassroots groups is mostly restricted to projects rather than core operations." (Gilmore, 2007, 47) This is an obstacle to the creation of new systems because the goals and resources of nonprofits are constrained by contracts that prevent them from growing their capacity to provide services beyond the limits set by their funders.

Foundations as a whole tend to give more short term, project-specific grants rather than general grants. Here NoVo is significantly ahead of the pack. According to a report by the Center



for Effective Philanthropy, foundations designate 21% of their grants for general operating support on average, and only 12% were both general, and long term. NoVo stopped giving long term grants during the pandemic, so I don't have information on how long term they are, but NoVo's grants overall are 32% general support, which jumps to 40% when you take into account total money spent rather than just the number of independent grants. This

increase in general operating support does appear to be connected to Peter's commitment to trusting relationships with grantees. CEP researchers discovered that "the most frequent reason why nonprofit leaders believe that foundations provide few multiyear GOS grants, cited by 29 percent of respondents, is a lack of trust in nonprofits and a desire to maintain control." (Buteau et al. 2020, 10) This indicates that nonprofits do want more general operation, and that they feel that this lack represents a lack of trust. This dynamic is flipped on the foundation side in the 489 interviews with foundation CEOs and Program Officers, the CEP was "unable to identify

significant barriers foundation leaders experience in providing or increasing their provision of multiyear GOS [General Operating Support]. The explanation for why it's not being done more widely seems to be that it doesn't fit with the foundation's approach, [or] simply hasn't been prioritized" (CEP 2020) While nonprofits feel that this lack of long-term general support represents a lack of trust, foundation CEOs seem to just not really care. By stating explicitly that "Core to NoVo's grantmaking philosophy is to provide grants that are both flexible and long term," (novofoundation.org) and committing to giving more general operation grants, NoVo is letting local nonprofits know that it trusts them, and that NoVo is listening to their needs.

One of the other ways NoVo helps non-profits to function in the long term is by allowing rollover of their grant funding from one year to the next. Most foundations require that the organizations they work with spend all of their grant money each year, as an assurance of efficacy. Novo resists the capitalist notion that spending the most money is correlated with the most efficacy by allowing the nonprofits they work with to rollover money. One of my interlocutors noted that this is "very useful, particularly in the beginning." This activist was part of an organization that used rollover funds to build capacity. If not for the flexibility of NoVo's grants this organization, and others in Kingston, would likely not have the ability to make long-term investments. Another interlocutor noted that the ability to build capacity over multiple years allowed their nonprofit to become more radical. "We've initiated a couple of really important programs in the last few years that probably wouldn't have happened without Novo. I think that [our organization] has really turned a corner with being a rad organization and is more progressive compared to where it was before ... we've really tried to center justice in our work, and there was none of that before and Novo has been really supportive of that. And it seems to be a theme and seems to be what Peter Buffet wants to come out of all this." This interlocutor felt

that their organization was aligned with NoVo's goals for these grants. Here these radical activities represent a shift in focus away from service provision and towards the creation of programs that build new communities and resources. Buffett's desire to build long term systems is manifested in the way these grants allow nonprofits to build capacity in ways that other foundations do not through loosening grant requirements. Buffett wants the nonprofits he funds to be more than just services that help people get the bare minimum, by unshackling them from the constant expectation of results that is expected by more business-oriented foundations. By loosening restrictions on both how and when grants can be used Buffett gives more power to local nonprofits to determine their own vision for the future.

Decolonizing Philanthropy

One of the goals mentioned repeatedly in Buffett's writing and in promotional materials for NoVo is establishing a reciprocal relationship with the local community. NoVo's focus on the creation of local systems is a result of Buffett's attempts to avoid what he calls "Philanthropic Colonialism." Buffett noticed that many of his fellow philanthropists "had the urge to 'save the day' in some fashion. People (including me) who had very little knowledge of a particular place would think that they could solve a local problem. Whether it involved farming methods, education practices, job training or business development, over and over I would hear people discuss transplanting what worked in one setting directly into another with little regard for culture, geography or societal norms." (Buffett NYT) When foundations attempt to solve a social problem, whether its poverty, hunger, housing, or anything else, they have a tendency to go in with a plan already laid out. Because foundations often hire outside experts, academics, and consultants to help them design their programs, they may not feel the need to seek input from the community. Buffett wants to resist the impulse to privilege this expert knowledge over the lived

experience of the people actually experiencing social ills. Buffett wants to reverse this power dynamic in his work with Novo by using relationships with the local community as a prerequisite for his work. By staying connected to the Kingston community, Buffett hopes to “learn in a relationship that traditional grant-making rarely offered.” (novofoundation.org) Rather than positioning himself as a colonial expert, Buffett is hoping to think outside the box of traditional philanthropy by listening to the needs of the local community. Buffett’s goal is to align the functions of his local systems with the needs of the community, rather than attempt to align the community with his idea of how they should be.

Buffett is trying to decolonize his approach to philanthropy by removing himself from the position of colonial expert. Buffett does not act as if he has the solutions to all of Kingston’s problems. Instead, he meets with people in the community and lets them know he respects them in order to get their feedback. My interlocutors repeatedly noted how easy it was to receive and renew funding with Novo, and they felt they had more freedom and respect than they had with previous organizations. One of my interlocutors spoke to the drastic change they felt when interacting with Peter in comparison to other organizations that they had worked with previously: “we had a lovely conversation, and at the end of it all, we had a handshake. I’ve never had that with a grantor. It’s usually well, you’ve got to do this, and you got to do that and needs requirements and blah, blah, blah. And it was literally, it was incredible.” Even in his interpersonal interactions, Buffett wants to ensure that the people he is trying to serve feel respected. Many foundations have distrustful, if not antagonistic relationships with the people they serve. Buffett also accomplishes his goal by focusing on one geographic area. This may seem self-evident, but many philanthropic foundations often operate on a much larger scales. Many foundations have an international reach and focus on specific issues. By focusing on a

small geographic area and a wide variety of issues, Novo has the ability to flexibly respond to problems at a local level while also ensuring that nonprofit workers remain close to the people they are serving.

Ch 2: Broken Foundation

While NoVo is a relatively progressive organization, it still has an outsize influence on Kingston activism. The mere presence of such a large, wealthy, foundation warps the community around it, regardless of its intentions. Despite its attempts at reform, NoVo still reinforces many of the negative effects that philanthropy can have on communities. NoVo still pushes grassroots organizations into incorporating as non-profits, pushes those nonprofits into a specific type of activism, creates division in the community, and reinforces gentrification.

Nonprofitization

One of the most pressing issues is non-profit incorporation. Although NoVo does not explicitly require grantees to be nonprofits, nearly all of them are, as 501(c)(3) status is a standard grant requirement for the NPIC, because it is required for tax exempt donations. Being a non-profit comes with a variety of government requirements and reporting mechanisms, which pulls grassroots organizations away from systemic change and towards service provision as they get drawn into the shadow state. One of my interlocutors described the problems their non-profit went through after it was incorporated. “we’ve been able to do like very little actual systems change work. To have that rapid expansion requires so much more people power, it requires folks to monitor nonprofit compliance and finances and a board and bylaws and all these different tasks and administrative checklists. Not only does that prevent folks’ capacity and time from investing in actual systems change work, but it also automatically builds a barrier for folks who are impacted by those systems to work within the organization.” Although requirements around grant making are looser with NoVo, it cannot avoid the pitfalls inherent to the foundation structure. Incorporation as a non-profit comes with a variety of requirements in addition to any

requirements for funds from the grantor. Non-profits must file both with the IRS and the state government, create a board of directors and bylaws, and engage in a variety of other bureaucratic practices. There can be a variety of costs associated with incorporation, including filing fees and new hires, often consultants who are more familiar with the inner workings of the NPIC than grassroots organizers.

My interlocutor touched on another point that is a more hidden cost of incorporation. Navigating the incorporation process requires money, connections, and familiarity with tax law, all things that increase the amount of time, money, and social capital required to become engaged in an organization. This is consistent with a point made by King and Osayande that “the non-profit structure is predicated on a corporate structure and hierarchy that rewards ‘bourgeois credentials’ and ‘upward mobility’; the non-profit model makes it easier for young economically privileged people just coming out of college to start a non-profit than to engage in long-term established movements; the model is obsessed with institution building rather than organizing; and it forces social justice activists to become more accountable to funders than to our communities” (King & Osayande 83) The funding structures and associated social worlds of the NPIC lead to a system in which businesslike institutions that serve as repositories for philanthropic wealth replace broad based movement building. The business of building nonprofit institutions rather than political movements redirects the power of organizing away from ordinary people and towards professionalized, college educated, white folks.

These factors collectively pull non-profits away from social (systemic as my interlocutor says) change and towards direct service as their workers become spread more thinly by the requirements of incorporation. This process can also be antithetical to the intention of capacity grants as incorporation and its associated expenses reduce the time and resources workers in the

organization have and the types of activities they can perform. One interlocutor put it very simply “I just think they [nonprofits] thought [NoVo Grants] would be a lot more effective than it was. Because a lot of it seems to go to administrative and overhead type of stuff as opposed to actually materially helping people.” The nonprofits my interlocutor is speaking of changed its methods of activism because of the administrative tasks required of a nonprofit. Because these skills are essential to the operation of a nonprofit, once nonprofits incorporate, “the management skills required to maintain the operation of nonprofit organizations become more important than the organizing skills needed to develop grassroots leaders, make institutional change, develop methods to raise community consciousness, or build a movement.” (Pérez, 2007, 97). The push to incorporate redistributes resources away from the people who need them and towards those with the skills to navigate the bureaucratic corridors of the NPIC.

Appealing to Grantors

Incorporation as a non-profit gives grassroots organizations the opportunity to explore a world filled with all types of grants. As non-profits grow, their overhead increases, and they need to apply for more grants. While NoVo’s grants don’t come with a whole lot of requirements, they’re still given out by rich people, just like most grants. An interlocutor observed that this created a situation in which “people with these radical politics [are] appealing [for grants] to people who don’t align with those radical politics from a class interest or material perspective.” While there aren’t explicit requirements, there are implicit ones. The most important being that “NoVo does not accept unsolicited proposals for funding consideration, preferring instead slow and trusting relationship building.” (novofoundation.org) NoVo’s focus on relationship building masks the power imbalance inherent in the foundation structure. The decision not to have any open grant applications puts a huge amount of power in the hands of NoVo’s three-person board

of directors, two of whom are Peter and Jennifer Buffett. NoVo rarely has open calls for grant applications, instead preferring to “work in close consultation with people in the community and other experts whose deep knowledge we can draw upon to make our funding choices” (novofoundation.org). This means that a nonprofit’s ability to receive a grant is directly related to how connected it is to NoVo. This gives an advantage to people who already exist in Peter Buffett’s social sphere and think like him. Because power over who receives grants is so concentrated with NoVo’s board of directors, there is an incentive to appeal to the sensibilities of the Buffetts. I’ll explore the specific ways this incentive manifests on activists’ interactions with NoVo in the next chapter, but one interlocutor explains how they perceive NoVo’s funding priorities. “The ways that NoVo wants to fund ... fundamental issues like housing and food injustice are through other traditional liberal nonprofit initiatives who don't have a more radical vision of changing fundamental problems.” This sentiment, that NoVo does desire to reform existing systems rather than create new ones, was echoed by other interlocutors. Because this is how activists perceive NoVo, and because NoVo is difficult to access for prospective grantees means that there is pressure for grassroots organizations to make themselves more appealing to NoVo regardless of the actual requirements for the grant.

NoVo has also taken advantage of its size and reach to create unofficial prohibitions for their grants. Multiple interlocutors have told me that in private meetings NoVo discouraged them from using NoVo funds to work on projects that seek to defund the police. Defund is a systemic movement against the oppression of black and brown people, the type of systemic change that NoVo claims to want. This prohibition is an example of the pressure that nonprofits face in conforming to NoVo’s standards despite its relative lack of explicit grant requirements. Instead of pushing for truly radical change, NoVo is attempting to appeal to those who are invested in

systems of oppression. NoVo sees defund the police as “a provocative phrase. It has the potential of causing division when a collaborative solution is necessary. We support the process of communities examining and debating all ideas in good faith, however challenging they may appear to be.” (novofoundation.org) This milquetoast response to police violence is representative of a greater trend in philanthropy that Rodríguez identifies in the George Soros funded Open Society Foundation, where instead of being grounded in a desire to fundamentally redistribute power in society “The imperative to protect—and, in Soros's case, to selectively enable with funding—dissenting political projects emerges from the presumption that existing social, cultural, political, and economic institutions are in some way perfectible, and that such dissenting projects must not deviate from the unnamed "values" which serve as the ideological glue of civil society” (Rodríguez, 2007, 28). By dismissing police abolition and calling for collaboration and good faith, Buffet is reaffirming that the police are a fundamental element of society. This type of rhetoric “exerts a disciplinary or repressive force on contemporary social movement organizations while nurturing a particular ideological and structural allegiance to state authority that preempts political radicalisms” (Rodríguez 29). When NoVo refuses to take a stance on an issue like police abolition, and then refuses to fund organizations that support that issue, they are using their power and influence to push local nonprofits away from systemic change, betraying their rhetorical commitment to radical systemic change.

Social Division

Whether or not to accept NoVo funding is a serious decision for many organizations. I've spent a while discussing the drawbacks of incorporation for activist organizations, but money comes with many benefits. The decision whether to take Novo money can be a divisive one. While some of my interlocutors did not cite NoVo as a dividing force in the Hudson Valley, more

did, which I took as a sign of division. More than one interlocutor refused my request for an interview because it was about NoVo, indicating that there is some fear of speaking about NoVo in the community. One of my interlocutors connected the spectrum of opinions that organizations have on NoVo to their differing approaches to activism. “[These organizations are] all generally on the same page about things like Black Lives Matter, but how they think we should go about that is radically different. And so, a lot of non-NoVo orgs don't really want to interface with NoVo orgs.” NoVo has a specific plan for organizations that they are funding, and the money to back it up. Despite their claims to be responsive to the community, there is no mechanism for actual community accountability, and organizations that don't fit that vision are pushed into the shadow of groups that accept NoVo funding. This perspective was underscored in another interview where the interlocutor said that “in general, folks are really divided over NoVo. I personally see defund as a huge cause of that.” NoVo's refusal to engage with police abolition alienates them from many radical groups who feel as though their suffering is being put in a subordinate position to the maintenance of existing social relations that disenfranchise them. As I will explore more deeply in the third chapter, NoVo's attempts to make everyone happy show a clear favoritism towards those who benefit from existing social relations, which makes them incompatible with more radical projects that seek to dismantle existing institutions.

NoVo's vision for an interconnected local economy has created a tight knit group of NoVo funded organizations that work together. One interlocutor noted that “a lot of the NoVo orgs prop each other up ... it's almost impossible to find a nonprofit in Kingston that doesn't have some degree of NoVo funding or isn't directly impacted by that funding.” This ability to create a network of community support is important, but because it is connected to NoVo funding, it can leave out groups that are uncomfortable with the amount of influence NoVo has on the

community or whose positions or methods NoVo does not approve of. This overbearing influence is not entirely intentional, but it does contribute to the feeling that NoVo is creating an in and out group. One of my interlocutors stated that they “often feel like it's really unfortunate that a foundation like Novo can insert themselves into this landscape and this narrative, and cause a lot of like disruption, not only to the community, but in the activist space as well, and create such a divide between folks. It can be really irreparable in a lot of ways.” Regardless of NoVo’s intent, it has had a significant impact on the everyday interactions between activists in Kingston. NoVo’s influence has seeped into many aspects of the Kingston activist community, and its statements about being accepting don’t remove the pressure to conform to NoVo’s implied standards. The most pressing system of oppression in Kingston is property ownership, one of the most fundamental social systems under capitalism. By examining the process of gentrification in Kingston, I will unpack how NoVo’s implicit standards affect the way activists fight gentrification in Kingston.

Gentrification

Gentrification is often presented as an issue of scarcity, and thus it is assumed that if enough resources are distributed to those in need, the impact of gentrification will be reduced. In his paper “The City as a Growth Machine,” Harvey Molotch turns this assumption on its head, showing that increased population levels and economic activity can have negative effects on locals as “more money entering an area’s real estate market not only results in more structures being built but also increases the price of land and, quite plausibly, the rents on previously existing “comparable” buildings. Thus, higher investment levels can push the entire price structure upward.” (Molotch, 1976, 113) Buffet’s investment in large projects like the Farm Hub and the Pine Street Medical Center, and cultural centers like Radio Kingston and the Omega

Institute can have huge benefits for the community, but this type of development can also have unintended consequences. Buffett is still operating in the paradigm of development where “the desire for growth provides the key operative motivation toward consensus for members of politically mobilized local elites, however split they might be on other issues, and that a common interest in growth is the overriding commonality among important people in a given locale” (Molotch, 1976, 310) Molotch uses population growth as an index for “a pattern ordinarily comprising an initial expansion of basic industries followed by an expanded labor force, a rising scale of retail and wholesale commerce, more far-flung and increasingly intensive land development, higher population density, and increased levels of financial activity.” (Molotch, 1976, 311) This pattern of population growth, increased economic activity, and increased investment, is reflected in the normative growth patterns for many U.S. cities. “In cities that are highly dependent on property taxes, such as those in the United States, seeking to increase your tax base by increasing middle-class homeowners to the central city is seen to be fiscal pragmatism.” (Lees et al. 205) Of course, middle class is often an code word for white people, and therefore, this growth-based, middle class focused standard of U.S. urban development often leads to an increase in wealthy white people in these communities and a corresponding displacement of lower socio economic status people of color.

Molotch asks us “to see each geographical map—whether of a small group of land parcels, a whole city, a region, or a nation—not merely as a demarcation of legal, political, or topographical features, but as a mosaic of competing land interests capable of strategic coalition and action” (Molotch, 1976, 311). In this vision of competing land interests, communities are invested in differentiating themselves from each other. In Molotch’s view communities are often competing with each other for resources from the government or large corporations, but a large

foundation like NoVo, focusing so single mindedly on a locale like Kingston, has the same effect as these more traditional institutions. Because Molotch is more focused on industrial development he sees growth-oriented elites who “attempt to maintain the kind of ‘business climate’ that attracts industry: for example, favorable taxation, vocational training, law enforcement, and ‘good’ labor relations. To promote growth, taxes should be ‘reasonable,’ the police force should be oriented toward protection of property, and overt social conflict should be minimized” (Molotch, 1976, 311). In a post-industrial world where the service industry has overtaken the manufacturing industry as the largest sector in the American economy. This means making a locale more attractive to people who can afford luxury and recreational services. Growth means less focus on catering to industry, and more catering to tourists and those with disposable income as well as creating places for them to see, go, and do. Because one of the goals of the growth machine is to connect “feelings of community” and “civic pride to the growth goal, tying the presumed economic and social benefits of growth in general to growth in the local area,” (Logan and Molotch, 1987, 117) increasing Kingston’s appeal to tourists becomes a civic good, attaching a positive moral judgement to the replication of white culture that makes rich, white, tourists more comfortable.

This drive to differentiate Kingston from other localities is shown in NoVo’s environmentalist ethos and its focus on large scale infrastructural investments and cultural centers. However, this type of growth-oriented development has issues, primarily that “growth often costs existing residents more money. Evidently, at various population levels, points of diminishing returns are crossed such that additional increments lead to net revenue losses” (Molotch, 1976, 319). Moloch also notes that “the tendency is for rapid growth to be associated with high rates of unemployment” (Molotch, 1976, 321). By building amenities and welcoming

newcomers with open arms, NoVo is contributing to unemployment and hurting local businesses while many of the jobs that it is attracting are low quality service industry jobs. Moloch notes that “workers are mobile and generally capable of taking advantage of employment opportunities emerging at geographically distant points. As jobs develop in a fast-growing area, the unemployed will be attracted from other areas in sufficient numbers not only to fill those developing vacancies but also a work-force sector that is continuously unemployed” (Molotch, 1976, 320-1). As populations shift and new opportunities for employment come and go, growth ultimately leaves behind more or the same amount of unemployment as before. As I will explore more deeply in the third chapter, the benefits of growth are stratified based on race, class, and other social structures. When new people come who are more likely to be able to afford rising costs of living, they are more likely to find jobs that work for them, while existing residents find both their jobs and their homes threatened. I will now examine a few of NoVo’s larger investments to explore how discrepancies between NoVo’s intent and effect can have a negative impact on activists and the community at large.

Case Study: Food Co-op

The Kingston Food Co-op is located in a NoVo-owned building and has received at least \$200,000 from the foundation. Studies have shown that food co-ops are underutilized by people of color and low-income people for a variety of reasons. The most visible is that the natural farming movement and the co-op movement are overwhelmingly white. In their analysis of “new agriculture” in the Hudson Valley, Nevarez and Simmons noted that “Latin American and West Indian farm workers are conspicuously underrepresented in farmers market booths and photo-heavy food and farming blogs, underscoring how race is characteristically erased from the amenity experience of the region’s new agriculture” (2019, 34). Natural food movements and

farmers markets often erase the people who actually did the labor of growing and picking local food. Likewise, often “cooperatives struggle with racial and class homogeneity. The natural food movement, which many of today’s co-ops participate in, is still largely a white cultural landscape.” (Zitcer, 2014, 823) The coop was started with good intentions, and it incorporates many positive developments like a solidarity fund that members can donate to in order to provide free memberships to BIPOC and low income communities. The co-op is a good example of how even the most well-intentioned projects can replicate oppressive power dynamics.

The idea of a solidarity membership is great, but, The Food Co-op has not been able to guarantee that it will have competitive prices, something that many other co-ops struggle with. “Many co-ops have stringent standards about what they will and will not sell. That often means they favor local and organic products, pricing out certain consumers who might want to shop in the stores. And prices at supermarkets have gotten lower, as economies of scale have grown, and agricultural commodities have been subsidized. This has left co-ops vulnerable to the charge that they are elitist and inaccessible from a standpoint of price and product mix” (Zitcer, 2014, 823). Guaranteeing membership is not the same thing as guaranteeing access, especially since the co-op may not open for another five years (<https://www.kingstonfoodcoop.com>). There’s nothing overtly wrong with the co-op, but it exemplifies some of the more subtle issues around NoVo funding. The co-op is an institution that holds specific appeal to white people and has the potential for social change, but also the potential to be a glorified Whole Foods. It is important for us to ask ourselves whether there is a more immediate, reliable way to increase food access in Kingston that is not also a center for the reproduction of the specific type of white culture that appeals to white transplants.

Case Study: Omega Institute

NoVo donates a significant portion of its funds to institutions that do not serve marginalized people. NoVo donated almost \$6 million to the Omega Institute for Holistic studies between 2017 and 2020. According to its website “Omega is a nonprofit, donor-supported, educational organization at the forefront of holistic studies.” (eomega.org) Omega is in Rhinebeck, across the Hudson River from Kingston, in a significantly wealthier area. Omega offers workshops in a variety of fields with names like “Secret Teachings of the Way” where a white woman teaches “Advanced energy medicine techniques from other realms” and “ancient shamanic practices for releasing the old, toxic emotions that undermine your health, wealth, and happiness” all via livestream. (eomega.org) You can also learn beginners pickleball or “sound healing and the art of self-care” (eomega.org). Pickleball is the cheapest workshop on the website, at \$255 for the weekend retreat, but most at least cross the \$300 threshold and many cost up to \$500. If you don’t live nearby, accommodations can run you up another \$300 a night. One has to wonder why Omega needs \$6 million dollars from NoVo when it appears to be a thriving luxury retreat center. While Omega does offer some scholarships, this type of aid, as with many other scholarship programs, is mostly superficial. Someone who works 40 hours a week doesn’t want to spend a weekend learning about pickleball or reiki. Going on an adult retreat isn’t just about having disposable income. In order to attend a workshop, you also need to have disposable time, disposable energy, and an interest in learning these skills that are, frankly, not that useful for most people’s daily lives. Omega also provides very few jobs to the surrounding area, providing 200 seasonally. (Applebome, 2007, NYT). Despite a commitment to “democratize the local economy,” Buffett has still chosen to give a large portion of his funds to an institution by and for wealthy people. As much as he presents himself as down to earth, it is

important to remember that “While the ruling class might not all sit down together in a room and decide policy, members of this class do go to school together, vacation together, live together, and share ideas through various newspapers and magazines, conferences, think tanks, spokespeople, and research and advocacy groups.” (Kivel, 2007, 132). Buffett’s attempts to integrate himself into the Kingston community are admirable, but do not undo the lifetime he has spent with the ultra-wealthy. The Omega Institute is one place where Kivel’s “ruling class” bump shoulders, and thus the knowledge produced there will likely serve to reify its own existence rather than question it.

Buffett’s investment in the Omega Institute pushes us to ask how responsive NoVo is to all of the members of the Kingston community. Olúfẹmi Táíwò asks us to question what “room” we are in when we commit to supporting marginalized people. We all obey different social standards and rules based on how we grew up, and we all have different social worlds. Táíwò observes that “‘centering the most marginalized’ in my experience has usually meant handing conversational authority and attentional goods to whoever is already in the room and appears to fit a social category associated with some form of oppression—regardless of what they have or have not actually experienced, or what they do or do not actually know about the matter at hand” (Táíwò, 2002, 59). In other words, if we don’t reach beyond our social worlds to ask what people in social worlds different from our own need, we may not understand what those who are in marginalized positions truly need. Earlier in this chapter I discussed barriers to entry for marginalized people who wanted to include work with a nonprofit in their daily life. Many of those same barriers apply to community relationships with NoVo. While they do occasionally hold open houses and forums, NoVo’s three-person board of directors is a very small, rich room.

Case Study: The Hudson Valley Current

The Hudson Valley Current is a local currency founded in 2013 to promote local businesses. Buffett has donated a total of \$935,000 dollars to the Hudson Valley Current, which is more money than the total value of all transactions using currents in the decade since its founding. Local currencies are a strategy for keeping money in certain communities. Creating a local currency encourages people to go to local businesses instead of supporting big chains or unsustainable businesses that won't or aren't allowed to use the local currency. The current's website states that when money is kept in the community, "our main streets, our local businesses and our neighbors keep more of the wealth, which strengthens our local community." (hudsonvalleycurrent.org). Here, "local community" is a stand in for businesses that have agreed to take currents, but those two things are not necessarily the same. Unfortunately, business owners are not quite the same thing as the general community. Nevarez and Simmons note that "Local merchants and developers have shown savvy in finding profitable niches in Kingston's amenity infrastructure, but so have metropolitan newcomers whose upstate dreams begin with the economic advantage they discovered on prior visits." (Nevarez and Simmons, 2019, 31) An article from 2018 in the New York Times lovingly depicts New York City natives who moved to Kingston to start businesses. Recall that growth increases rent prices and does not distribute its rewards equally. Business owners from out of town have two advantages over locals. Because the cost of living is generally higher in and around New York, these newcomers often have more spare capital to fund their business ventures than locals. Additionally, newcomers often have shared cultural experiences that help them to understand the services and products their fellow immigrants' desire. The article notes that "new upstate residents report that moving to the country connected them to the natural world in unexpected ways, filling a void left by the city

with something they were not expecting: serenity.” (Foster, 2018). New business owners from the city are familiar with what their visiting compatriots are interested in, and this is reflected in the Hudson Valley Current member businesses. The current is supported by plenty of local businesses, most of which aren’t really for locals. The three largest categories of businesses that use Currents, according to their website, are art, business services, and health and wellness. Art and Wellness are both for people with spare income, and business services are literally just for businesses. If NoVo is funding a currency primarily used to pay for business services and luxury items, it is using the money that originally came from tax exempt corporate profits to sponsor a currency that is primarily for the wealthy. Local currencies may have a slight boosting effect on local trade, but it doesn’t change the amount of goods being produced or work being done.

Imagining Main Street

The Current is another example of the language of local community being used to justify extraction. By creating a currency that can only be used to purchase goods that mainly appeal to visiting white people, the current is really just deepening the separation between incoming rich white folks and locals. By creating a currency primarily for luxury products, The Current is encouraging the separation between the people who use those products and the people who don’t. This separation is compounded by the fact that when white people start moving into a new location, their discomfort with their effects on the community manifests itself in a valorization of their own culture that pushes out anything else. Walton notes that a culture of whiteness “manifests as a nostalgic valorization of the old, or “heritage”, in stably diverse places. Acting as a “strategy of urban empowerment” (Shaw, 2007, p. 13), a culture of whiteness romanticizes a Victorian-era past in urban redevelopment and historic preservation priorities, while denying the history of exclusion and dispossession upon which these historical imaginaries were built.” The

current's invocation of "main streets" is a reference to an idealized rural American past—one that was supremely white. These main streets are also not representative of the experience of everyone who lives in Kingston. Because the Hudson Valley is a region where "amenity development has characteristically proceeded via interventions from institutions, individuals, and media from outside the region" (Nevarez and Simmons, 2019, 31), the public identity of these "main street" public spaces are determined not by the residents owning generational small businesses, but by newcomers investing in amenities for their contemporaries. These "main streets" serve to promote a vision of small business idealism that masks large scale inequality.

In Hudson, a city about 35 minutes away from Kingston, you can see this divide very clearly. "Hudson's small size inserts retail gentrification cheek by jowl within a community troubled by population decline, drug trade, and shrinking, underfunded public schools" (Nevarez & Simmons, 2020, 31). But this visible inequality is not the experience for many Hudson residents, or Hudson Valley residents generally. One of my interlocutors spoke about the experience of growing up as a Kingston weekender, and later becoming a full time resident and local activist. Being a weekender, they spent much of their time in some of the more touristy, boutique neighborhoods of Kingston. After growing up and exploring Kingston beyond its main streets, they discovered that "there's just a lot of places I've never been to a lot of things and a lot of people, a lot of communities, I had never really realized we're here. And as I started to spend more time here and get to know my neighbors, I realized how completely disassociated my parents' reality of this region was, like they literally didn't know some of their own neighbors." The economic domination by new, outsider businesses is not simply an issue of economic equality, it is also an issue of the hegemony of whiteness. When newcomers invade a public space and replace many of the businesses with their own, they change the social and cultural

character of the space. This social change has real effects. As white people transform their communities, people who don't fit white norms are excluded. Walton's research "demonstrates how maintaining comfort in stably desegregated Boston neighborhoods required social control of spaces white residents perceived to be unsafe and disordered; As a result, the Black, Puerto Rican, and Cape Verdean residents who had lived in these communities for decades felt less safe as white residents took steps to assuage their own anxieties" (Walton, 2021, 4). Cultural cooption makes native residents feel uncomfortable and unsafe as new residents pioneer their own safe spaces. These socially constructed safe spaces are the types of rooms that Táíwò is talking about. If these white business owners are the people Buffett is listening to, and it seems like they are considering he gave the current almost \$1 million, we must question his ability to reach all members of the Kingston community. In the next chapter I will more deeply explore how this relation between whiteness and gentrification is reinforced by philanthropic giving.

Ch 3: Better than Not Being There?

Gentrification and Amenity Development

The types of infrastructure NoVo builds are not neutral. Many of his largest projects have specific cultural appeal to white transplants. NoVo justifies its development-oriented approach to social work by saying on its website that, "[a]ny work done to improve a community—whether it's done by the government, local businesses, residents, activist groups, or a Foundation—by definition makes that community more attractive not just to those already there, but to outsiders too. This is why, alongside the work we are supporting the community to do to make life better in Kingston, we are also supporting a range of groups who are working on the critical need for

affordable housing.” (novofoundation.org) This is a statement that is technically true, but misleading. The value of the so-called improvement is not always the same for outsiders and locals. Nevarez and Simmons use the concept of amenities to analyze why some “improvements” can have different values for different communities. They define amenities as “material, visual, or cultural features of localities that offer pleasurable experiences.” They write, “Amenities have no immediate appeal but instead are subjectively mediated by socially constructed values and tastes held by different social groups” (Nevarez & Simmons, 2019, p. 19). The culture and values of any given demographic group mediate their experiences of a place. In their work Nevarez and Simmons examine the cultural values of upper class, white, New Yorkers that attract them to the Hudson Valley: “place based amenities of the kind endorsed by creative place-making—think art destinations, culinary festivals, and historic places of “national” significance—may presume a social accessibility or cultural privilege that is racially stratified and encoded into color-blind discourses of whiteness. This is suggested, for example, by the dominant whiteness found in urban farmers markets, contemporary art galleries, and “DIY” urban design. Presumably, racialized frameworks of distinction-making inform the gentrification process, given that white gentrifiers favor neighborhoods where existing populations are predominantly white, notwithstanding ethnic and class differences.” (Nevarez & Simmons, 2019, 21) As I have already begun exploring, with the Hudson Valley Current, certain types of businesses and amenities are specifically appealing to white transplants, and once transplants start coming, they start attracting more transplants.

Walton notes that when white residents have established themselves in a community, they start to push out the people who once lived there, not just economically, but culturally. “White residents of diverse neighborhoods use their power to advocate for styles and amenities that cater

to their tastes and preferences, perpetuating racial domination through political and cultural displacement.” (Walton 5) The outsize capital, social or otherwise, of white people in diverse communities means that when they become part of a community, their cultural values are replicated, creating more amenities of the type Nevarez and Simmons are concerned about. They note that because of the racial stratification caused by amenity development, those who use and those who work at these amenities become increasingly separated. “A dialectic of economic reliance and spatial divergence between foreign immigrants and metropolitan newcomers diversifies the regional ecology, as linked migration channels an immigrant proletariat to certain cities and the amenity migrants they labor for to other cities and towns” (Nevarez & Simmons 2019, 36 cf. Nelson et al. 2014). Furthermore, insofar as these two groups sustain hinterland population in-migration, small cities diverge in a dual system for metropolitan class formation, in which social groups at opposite ends of the economic hierarchy pursue unequal opportunities via new settlements, new place-based activities, and transformed place identities.” So, despite openly supporting integration and attempting to have a positive relationship with the Kingston community, Buffett is still having an effect that increases segregation. As noted in chapter 2, Molotch observed that migrant labor resulting from increasing growth tends to attract more labor than the area can support. The production of white cultural institutions by NoVo supports the ongoing segregation of the Hudson Valley by clearly delineating Kingston as a “destination.”

Toxic Inclusion

I have already discussed that a growth-oriented development model can have significant negative effects on those who are native to the gentrified community. Much of this development is supported by the language of integration and cultural acceptance, like when, in an open letter to the Kingston community, Buffett writes:

At NoVo, we believe the coming century is going to see many more shocks like the pandemic, some considerably more severe, and so it is our intention to help the Kingston community not just survive but thrive through these events.

This requires becoming a community where everyone feels safe, seen and celebrated for who they truly are, in the full context of their race, gender, sexual orientation, income level and any other characteristic or current life situation. We are a long way from that at the moment, as is the country. But only when the community as a whole is stable and secure enough to be involved in shaping the future can we hope to achieve true self-reliance; a community so connected and known to itself that it can cherish all of its members as it provides for all of its needs.

(Buffett, 2021)

Buffett asserts that his goal is a completely integrated, whole community whose members take care of each other. But Buffett's plans have divided the community. Buffett completely flattens all social differences into one uniform mass in which income, race, and any other characteristic are irrelevant, ignoring that some people suffer from systems of oppression more than others. This desire for universal inclusion often leads to a denial of those who have less access to those in power. In Chapter 2 I explored how this dynamic can alienate members of the activist community, but this celebration of diversity without a thought to who benefits from the in-migration that causes diversity is a key element of authorizing gentrification. Diversity becomes an amenity that attracts new people to the community, who then impose their own vision of what diversity means on that community. When we look at how NoVo treats people of different incomes, we see that this promise comes with a significant caveat: as long as you follow certain social norms that make the community feel "stable and secure." The Broadway Bubble fiasco, which I discuss below, shows how quickly the voices of poor people are ignored when people with more social status are concerned.

The Emancipatory City

This generous vision of urban diversity falls into what Lee et al. term the “emancipatory city thesis” where gentrification is associated with “appeals to diversity, difference, and social meaning” (Lees et al, 2008). Essentially, implying that as different communities mix through processes of migration, they create a deeper sense of community, dealing with issues like social isolation, democratizing class differences, and bringing more economic opportunity. Especially salient to the last point, Lees et al. notes that this process of migration is unidirectional “why not make it possible for the poor to live in rich neighborhoods?” (Lees et al. 2008, 206) As we have already seen, the fruits of gentrification are not equally distributed, and this toxic multiculturalism serves to mask this inequality rather than ameliorate it. “By abstractly celebrating formal equality under the law, the rhetoric of the emancipatory city tends to conceal the brutal inequalities of fortune and economic circumstance that are produced through the process of gentrification” (Lees et al. 2008, 210) Additionally, many of the supposed benefits of gentrification, especially the social mixing, are questionable at best. Lees et al. note that a study on gentrification in London “found no social mixing” and thus “no transference of social capital from high to low-income groups or any of the other desired outcomes.” Walton’s study of American gentrification also notes a variety of ways in which desegregation policies lead to “microsegregation” rather than cross-racial social exchange. (Walton, 2021, 3.1) We are seeing mass displacement in Kingston that is being responded to through classical methods of development that are only expediting the process rather than ameliorating it.

I’ve already analyzed the food co-op and Omega Institute as sites of elite knowledge production and social exclusion. But these institutions also serve to attract more white people by

making Kingston more in line with their vision of a creative, boutiquey, country town. We can also understand the Hudson Valley Farm Hub as an example of “the Hudson Valley’s ‘new agriculture’ [which] exemplifies a signature rural amenity popular with Brooklynites. Since the new millennium, the region has witnessed a growth in new farms led disproportionately by young and women operators. Out of necessity and principle, these farms pursue value-added niches that contrast to conventional farming and rely primarily on sales through farmers markets, community support agriculture, farm stands, and ‘u-pick’ farm visits” (Nevarez and Simmons, 2019, 34).

Appropriation and Authorization

These institutions represent not merely an economic obstacle for inclusion of marginalized people, but also a cultural one. These amenities often, and especially in NoVo’s case, repurpose imagery from radical social justice movements to justify their less-than-radical approaches to social justice. “With increasing frequency, we are party (or participant) to a white liberal and ‘multicultural’/‘people of color’ liberal imagination that venerates and even fetishizes the iconography and rhetoric of contemporary Black and Third World liberation movements, and then proceeds to incorporate these images and vernaculars into the public presentation of foundation-funded liberal or progressive organizations.” (Rodríguez, 2007, 34) The language of “systems,” the support of the Omega Institute, which commodifies and repackages indigenous traditions, and its support of “new agriculture,” are just a few ways that NoVo uses radical and indigenous imagery to mask their neoliberal policies. This appropriation of radical and indigenous imagery by white philanthropists authorizes modes of activism that do not “deal with the root causes of issues.” The Omega Institute and other culturally appropriative institutions use radical imagery within a neoliberal context to satisfy desires for surface level diversity without

changing the fundamental structures that they are operating within. This appropriation authorizes capitalist solutions to social problems that are not the type of effective action that would actually serve to liberate these groups. This acceptance is a one-way form of inclusion, appropriation shifts radical imagery and ideas into a form palatable to white culture, but rarely transforms white culture to match radical practices. One of my interlocutors felt that this one-way inclusion was directly connected to gentrification.

It feels like NoVo's vision is not actually trying to uplift any marginalized narratives necessarily, but rather help white folks be more woke and involved. I think that's really what their vision is and in this evolved, liberal, Kingston I think they imagine a community in which everyone then becomes involved, even if these folks are coming from the city, or from wherever and driving up the housing market and making Airbnbs and making it harder for folks who have lived here their entire lives to like exist in this space.

The effect of this form of appropriative inclusion is that it makes white people feel more involved by simply acknowledging the existence of marginalized people while simultaneously wielding this recognition as a reason to ignore the needs of marginalized people. The simplest solution, and one that NoVo refuses to endorse, is to ask people to stop moving to Kingston, but they won't, because their vision of inclusion doesn't involve giving anything up. Instead, they are using the appearance of diversity and the language of inclusion to maintain existing power structures that oppress marginalized people. This appearance of diversity is also a type of amenity in and of itself, produced collectively by NoVo and its associated institutions, with the effect of attracting white folks who feel that they are moving to a location that matches their values.

The Performance of Critique

NoVo seeks an inoffensive vision of the future that doesn't exclude anybody, but this vision prioritizes the needs of people who want to feel involved in the community and are socially and culturally closer to Peter Buffett. NoVo constantly seeks to be less offensive to white people. When NoVo refuses to fund police abolition work, when it chooses to avoid phrases like "prison abolition" because it is "divisive" (novofoundation.org), when they present development as an inevitable force that always "makes that community more attractive not just to those already there, but to outsiders too," they are expressing a mindset that appeals to white people who want to feel good without questioning their own presuppositions and privileges. I mentioned the naturalization of the NPIC in the introduction, but the NPIC, and NoVo itself, also serve to naturalize positions where things like the defunding the police, collective ownership, and action outside the NPIC are unimaginable. This unimaginability is reinforced by the supposedly liberal politics of NoVo rather than being weakened by it. When NoVo supports traditional nonprofit initiatives it is not creating new systems but revealing how "power reproduces itself through performances of self-critique, historical awareness, and progressive repair" (Hulsether, 2023, 1). These performances of critique are not necessarily intentionally appropriative or malignant. They arise from the attempt to solve social problems from within the limits designated by the NPIC. These limitations favor methods of action that do not threaten the comfort or ways of life of the people that benefit the most from retaining current social arrangements. Organizations that follow this path find themselves aligned with American liberals who seek reform rather than total systemic change.

NoVo reifies existing power structures through what Lucia Hulsether calls “capitalist humanitarianism,” “a hope not only that corporations and firms can remedy the forms of privation that they have entrenched but also that free markets generally might promote feminist, decolonial, and antiracist solidarity [and] the pedagogical projects and institutional arrangements it inspires” (Hulsether, 2023, 1). It is deeply ironic that when Peter Buffett says, “I’m not against capitalism, I’m for humanism” (Buffett, 2013) he is engaging in the exact type of linguistic play that Hulsether is talking about. This hope is representative of what journalist Anand Giridharadas calls a win-win approach to social change that holds “a promise of painlessness. What is good for me will be good for you ... You could help people in ways that let you keep living your life as is, while shedding some of your guilt.” (Giridharadas, 2018, 40) Neither Buffett nor the new residents of Kingston want to change the way they live their lives. The amenities that NoVo provides are attractive to Brooklynites because they hold the promise of allowing people to erase their guilt without considering the repercussions of their actions. This perspective is what serves to reinforce structures of power. By pushing a view of change that doesn’t require giving anything up, NoVo is reifying the idea that the systems we have do work, which means it is more productive to reform the NPIC, the prison industrial complex, and other systems designed to extract from people. In this sense we can consider NoVo itself an amenity whose cultural benefit is the reinforcement of a reformist view of social change.

One interlocutor recalls a public meeting with NoVo, and the frustration they and other community members had around NoVo’s housing work.

They’re [community members] visibly exhausted, upset, and emotional at the idea that if Peter gave them a check for two grand how much that could change their life. And NoVo just isn’t responsive about it. There’s a parallel to the nonprofit industry and that experience of how extractive fundraising off the experiences of black and brown bodies can be, and then their tangible life experience is no different and then similarly with NoVo, they are representing

themselves as this alternative and they're representing themselves as helping create this equitable community. But right now, that really means housing, that's something that could change people's lives in a tangible way, or redistributing resources in a way that could support keeping people in their homes. And never doesn't seem interested in either.

This interlocutor noted how simple it would be for NoVo to reform their funding by distributing money to individuals, rather than the few housing justice nonprofits they already fund or other large capital projects. I could not find any housing focused nonprofits in the data that I used for this paper, but some of my sources did confirm that NoVo has started funding some in the past few years, for which I do not have data. NoVo's reticence towards dealing with housing issues is representative of its win-win approach to social change. Gentrification is a process that is based on the systems that the NPIC exists to support. Housing reform is often pursued through eviction defense, affordable housing, and emergency rent assistance. These are all helpful short-term interventions, but none address the issues of increased rent floors and cost of living increases. Eviction defense and rental assistance don't solve the fact that the person who is in danger of losing their housing cannot sustainably support themselves, and affordable housing is often tied to average rent prices, which means that they too are tied to rising rent levels. And once people are homeless, they are at the mercy of underfunded social service initiatives. Most nonprofits dedicated to housing are not in the business of radically challenging existing housing structures, instead "poverty-focused and homelessness focused nonprofits are essentially encouraged to merely manage poor people: provide limited and conditional access to prison-like shelters and make people take budgeting classes or prove their sobriety." (Spade, 2020, 22) By failing to imagine a future beyond social service provision NoVo is making it harder for groups that "do the more threatening and effective work that grassroots mutual aid groups do for housing justice, like defending encampments against raids, providing immediate

no-strings health care and food to poor and unhoused people, fighting real estate developers, slumlords, and gentrification, or fighting for and providing access to actual long-term housing.” (Spade, 2020, 23)

Naturalization

One of my interlocutors summed up their ambivalence towards NoVo with this simple statement: “It’s better than not being there.” This ambivalence about NoVo’s existence is reflected by NoVo itself. On their website, in response to a question about discomfort with the presence of NoVo in Kingston, they say acknowledge that “at an individual level, philanthropy can do a lot of good; at the level of the system, it is a sign of its failure.” (novofoundation.org) Both of these statements are predicated on the tacit acceptance that philanthropy, and thus NoVo, are inevitable. By acknowledging that they are the result of a systemic failure, NoVo denies any responsibility for that failure. Here NoVo once again uses the language of the individual and the system to mask its actual effects. Acknowledging that the NPIC is corrupt without building systems that exist outside of the shadow state is another example of Hulsether’s “performance of repair.” Philanthropy isn’t just a result of capitalism; it is how capitalism maintains itself. When someone says that it is “better than not being there” it means that the NPIC is doing its job of preventing activists from imagining a world in which activism exists outside of the philanthropic system. When we don’t imagine new ways of escaping patterns of capitalist extraction, we are doomed to repeat them.

The clash between white social norms and radical activism came to a head in 2022 in a controversy around the Broadway Bubble Laundromat. NoVo bought the building after the previous laundromat closed “in order to ensure a laundromat could reopen in the space after the former one closed during the pandemic” (Kirby, 2022). Controversy began when a local

grassroots nonprofit The People's Cauldron, an organization that supports the homeless with a variety of services, including food, medicine, and clothing, parked its bus at the longtime homeless encampment in the parking lot adjacent to the laundromat. Ironically, the bus was bought with a NoVo grant. After The People's Cauldron moved in, the Broadway Bubble received two fines around sanitation and an occupied bus (Kirby, 2022). After receiving these fines NoVo "alleged TPC's presence in the parking lot was concurrent with a spike in criminal behavior involving drugs, harassment and even violence" (Shaw 2022).

Apparently, having regular support made the local homeless community more active. Visible homelessness often makes people uncomfortable, a view reinforced by an NPIC that views the people it helps with disdain. In a discussion about whether rules should be implemented in this parking lot, a NoVo spokesperson recounted a shocking conversation with a member of The People's Cauldron. "When I asked this individual what about when a parent and child comes to the laundromat and witnesses people engaging in public sex acts, the individual told me and my colleagues that the parent should simply just shield their child's eyes. That is unacceptable" (Kirby, 2022).

The Broadway Bubble parking lot has become a site for the reinforcement of social norms of what Kingston should look like. Homeless people having sex in public isn't part of the vision that NoVo has for Kingston. My first response to this is a question. Where are homeless people supposed to have sex? They live in public, that's what being homeless is. This may seem like a ridiculous question, but that's only because we have internalized the deservingness hierarchies of the NPIC. Sex is a fundamental human behavior, who are we to say they don't deserve it because they don't have a private place to hide their shame? To remove people from the place they are living, change where they receive services, and call the police on them just

because some of their actions make you uncomfortable is a gross expression of privilege. Imagining new systems means imagining a world in which we prioritize people's lived experiences over the appearance of propriety. The criminalization of living in public space disproportionately affects black and brown people who experience houselessness at higher rates. In a city that is already experiencing a housing and shelter crisis, forcing homeless people to move because they make others uncomfortable represents a prioritization of people's feelings about how their city should be over the lives of people who are already there.

Conflict escalated to a "trespassing arrest on a TPC member," which apparently "was only escalated to a criminal complaint [by NoVo] 'after all other options to address this situation were exhausted'" (Kirby, 2022). It is not clear what "other options" were pursued; certainly, there are many conflict resolution methods that don't involve the police. But the real problem is that this conflict is framed as being between NoVo and The People's Cauldron rather than NoVo and the people it is actively displacing. We are so used to seeing organizations act as representatives for marginalized groups that I couldn't find an article that asked the homeless people how they felt. NoVo is betraying its rhetoric by criminalizing activists and houseless people. Despite its rhetoric about designing new systems, NoVo is actively conspiring with both the Prison and Nonprofit Industrial Complexes to maintain a specific type of order on the streets of Kingston. Why can't we imagine a world in which we support people where they want to live instead of determining what is best for them? Because we are so used to nonprofits acting as representatives of marginalized people, The People's Cauldron became a stand in for the homeless people being criminalized. The best way to avoid situations in which impacted people are ignored is to have them be the leaders of their own movement rather than the subject of charity.

Conclusion: The Real Foundation is the Friends we Make along the Way

In practice NoVo ultimately perpetuates many of the problems it claims it is trying to solve, but it is still trying to solve them. Regardless of how well he implements his ideas, Peter Buffett seems committed to the idea of radical social change. Is it possible to integrate NoVo into a more effective, radical vision of social change? Many of the nonprofits and other organizations that NoVo funds are businesses or professional advocacy organizations. In her book *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, Jane McAlevey identifies these organizations as advocacy and mobilizing organizations. Advocacy is entirely professional, it “doesn’t involve ordinary people in any real way; lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and communications firms are engaged to wage the battle.” McAlevey notes that while advocacy is “effective for forcing car companies to install seatbelts or banishing toys with components that infants might choke on, this strategy severely limits serious challenges to elite power.” (McAlevey, 2016, 26) When the work of social change is left to professionals who have been trained to see the world within the confines of the nonprofit industrial complex, they won’t do work that destabilizes the arrangements their lives are organized around. By creating a class of people whose livelihoods depend on working within the system, they have a material interest in maintaining it. Mobilizing is similar to advocacy and represents the way many current grassroots nonprofits operate. “Mobilizing is a substantial improvement over advocacy, because it brings large numbers of people to the fight. However, too often they are the same people: dedicated activists who show up over and over at every meeting and rally for all good causes, but without the full mass of their coworkers or community behind them. This is because a professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls the mobilization; the staffers see themselves, not ordinary

people, as the key agents of change.” (McAlevey, 2016, 26) Mobilizing and advocacy represent the main types of nonprofit organizations in the U.S, and most of the groups NoVo funds. Because both methods rely on a professionalized class of nonprofit workers, they tend to be less responsive to the people they are serving. McAlevey believes that organizing that centers everyday people, not mobilizing or advocacy, is the best way to create a sustainable, responsive political movement.

Rather than placing the responsibility for change on a professional class of nonprofit workers, “organizing places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don’t consider themselves activists at all—that’s the point of organizing. In the organizing approach, specific injustice and outrage are the immediate motivation, but the primary goal is to transfer power from the elite to the majority, from the 1 percent to the 99 percent.” (McAlevey, 2016, 26) Organizing does not just ask ordinary people to go to marches or write letters, but rather empowers them to be activists themselves and asks them to think differently about their capacity for change. Hahrie Han, in *How Organizations Develop Activists*, quotes an interview with a national organizer that sums up the difference very simply: “The organizer thus makes two [strategic] choices: 1) to engage others, and 2) to invest in their development. The mobilizer only makes the first choice” (Han 2014, 10). Organizing skips the middleman and goes directly to empowering people who are outside of the NPIC. One of the factors that distinguishes organizing from mobilizing is that “organizers make requests for action that bring people into contact with each other and give them space to exercise their strategic autonomy. Research shows that it is through relationships and autonomous collective action that people’s motivations for action are likely to change, grow, and develop” (Han 2014, 16). Rather than relying on hierarchical organizational structures that use

money as a motivating factor, organizing asks people to autonomously decide why and how they want to take action. Top-down organization, like a foundation, is antithetical to this type of autonomy because power is always filtered through the NPIC, reducing the autonomy of independent actors. The more control people have over their movement, the more likely they are to be involved, and, conversely, when people believe that they have no decision-making power they are less likely to become involved. One of the ways this disempowerment is replicated is through the professionalization of activism.

One of the most critical changes that NoVo could make is to find more ways to fund groups that are not nonprofits. If NoVo can find a way to direct its funding towards mutual aid groups, they can have a much stronger direct impact on the lives of everyday people. Dean Spade defines mutual aid as “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them” (Spade, 2020, 11). Many of the organizations NoVo supports feed into the systems that NoVo claims it is trying to reform. Mutual aid is form of collective organization that puts power directly in the hands of the people. The main purposes of a mutual aid organization are “meeting people’s needs and mobilizing them for resistance” (Spade, 2020, 8), which both require large organizational structures. The professionalized, bureaucratic systems of the NPIC make it difficult to mobilize large amounts of people without falling into hierarchical standards of organization. One of my interlocutors spoke on the difficulty of doing mutual aid work from within the NPIC. Their focus shifted from large scale activist goals to “very little things that might seem insignificant, like trying to provide childcare or just allowing children to come to meetings, if there's no childcare come bring your child, or we do like participation stipends for members.” This activist observed

that these little things that lower the barriers to entry for marginalized people were difficult under the restrictions of the NPIC. The most illustrative example was about a car:

[Our Organization has] a car that was given to us, and it's a company car, we would love to have everybody just use it when they need but because we're a nonprofit, there are different insurances, background checks, things have to be approved, not only nonprofit compliant, but they also have to be approved by a board, which might not always represent the community that we're working with. If we're a mutual aid organization, we could just, you know, say that we trust each other and send off a car. So those little pieces become like big puzzle pieces in a nonprofit where, you know, as a smaller org, it is definitely more flexible and I think folks end up actually being able to show up more, because of those little changes you can implement quickly.

Hierarchical organization and regulatory restrictions are just a few of the obstacles that nonprofits face in attempting to provide direct service to their members. An important aspect of mutual aid is solidarity building by bringing different community members together. When it is easier for a group to be more flexible, they can accommodate the needs of all their members. NoVo is building a lot of spaces where people can come together physically but is not doing the work that would actually allow them to show up for their communities. This is how mutual aid can help to solve the issues of separation between service provision and social change. Providing resources to community members is a prerequisite for them becoming involved in their community. NoVo is not able to respond to the needs of Kingstonians directly because they have not done the work required to enable community members to have their voices heard. Because mutual aid groups often shy away from nonprofit incorporation, it is more difficult for large organizations like NoVo to fund them through regular channels. If NoVo truly wants to separate itself from the NPIC, it needs to work on directing more of its funds towards groups outside of traditional nonprofit standards.

Nonprofits in a Radical Social Movement

The problem with both mobilization and advocacy is that they still place control of the movement in the hands of paid professionals. Professionalism isn't necessarily a bad thing in a world where deep technical knowledge is so important, but deep knowledge of one subject does not translate to knowledge about all subjects. The people who know how to best organize and care for themselves are the people who are already caring for themselves and organizing in their personal social networks. In order to last, a political movement needs the resiliency afforded to it by a broad base of nonprofessionals who live their political message every day. Paula Rojas shows us a way to combine movement building with the professionalized nature of our world. "In other places, the movement building happens outside non-profits. However, these groups will sometimes start an NGO that serves a strategic purpose (such as providing technical assistance), but the non-profit does not have power to determine the movement's direction. Rather it is accountable to the movement" (Rojas, 2007, 207). If nonprofits are an accessory to a broad-based political movement rather than its base, they can provide important technical support to everyday people. Anyone can cook a meal, and if we reorganized our society into a broad-based political movement where we cook for each other in our daily lives, we wouldn't need food pantries. But not everyone can set up a complex irrigation system, provide legal defense, or provide specialized medical care.

The point of this analysis is not to tell people whether they should incorporate as a nonprofit or not, but to criticize foundations for the disparity they are creating by *requiring* grantees to be nonprofits so they can receive tax benefits. Spade notes that "There can certainly be good reasons to seek funding and have paid staff roles, but these steps should be taken with caution and with a focus on building transparent and accountable systems regarding money and

decision-making” (Spade, 2020, 70). The purpose of my critique of the NPIC is not to tell nonprofits what to do but encourage anybody who reads this to rethink how they view social services and social change. With a good foundation of communication and accountability, nonprofitization can benefit certain groups. One of my interlocutors believes that it is possible to incorporate and have responsive leadership practices. “A 501(c)(3) doesn't need to be structured the way other charity organizations are structured We are nonhierarchical, you have to have bylaws, and you probably do need some sort of governance, which could be like two people who don't have any more authority than anybody else, they do not need to have an executive director, 501(c)(3)-dom, is just the container in which we're in, but how we operate would not change at all.” There are plenty of ways for nonprofits and grassroots organizations to meet foundations in the middle, but this will only be possible if the foundation continuously works to balance the power dynamics that are inherent in grantor-grantee relationship.

Working Together

The professionalization and nonprofitization of activism has moved activism away from the daily lives of everyday people and towards a capitalist, businesslike model of social change. If we truly believe that the personal is political, broad-based movements should work to incorporate activism into daily life, instead of isolating it in the realm of professional nonprofits. We need to question the way we have established a hierarchy of professionalism for nonprofits. If we really believe that the people on the ground know best, why shouldn't they be making decisions? Many broad political movements rely on consensus building instead of traditional modes of organization. Paula Rojas shows us that this type of horizontalidad (horizontalization) is managed by Latin American social movements that are millions strong. “These movements hold *asambleas populares* (popular assemblies) to determine political agendas through

consensus. They are used by the Zapatistas, the MTD in Argentina, and many others engaged in struggles for autonomia. Grounded in the underlying principle of direct collective power, these practices are used to avoid power cementing in certain people placed in representative roles.”

Rojas explains, “People gather locally, in their community or neighborhood, on a street corner or somewhere else public and easily accessible to discuss and reflect on issues that need to be decided. What seems like a facilitator's nightmare—a large, sometimes very large, group of people without a set agenda—becomes a space to practice how we want to live collectively.” (Rojas, 2007, 203) What seems unimaginable to American political organizers is a quotidian practice with other political movements around the world. When we place so much money and power over our social movements in the hands of a few professionals, we are giving up the potential we have for decision making.

Novo could fund technical knowledge production, community spaces, and mutual aid groups, but should also take a serious look at how it funds certain institutions that reproduce capitalist modes of organization and extraction. Buffett’s desire to build and maintain institutions is admirable, but it also increases the material dependence of people on the same systems that are exploiting them. Building more infrastructure is good, but when it’s done without considering the imbalance effects that it may have on residents, it can become a form of extraction. While it is true that building a social movement requires people to settle their issues across lines of difference, current modes of social justice organization put much of the burden on minorities to reach out to white people without hurting their sensitivities or engendering guilt. If white folks don’t want to be left behind when the revolution comes, we need to start seriously considering not just how we can help, but how we let go.

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