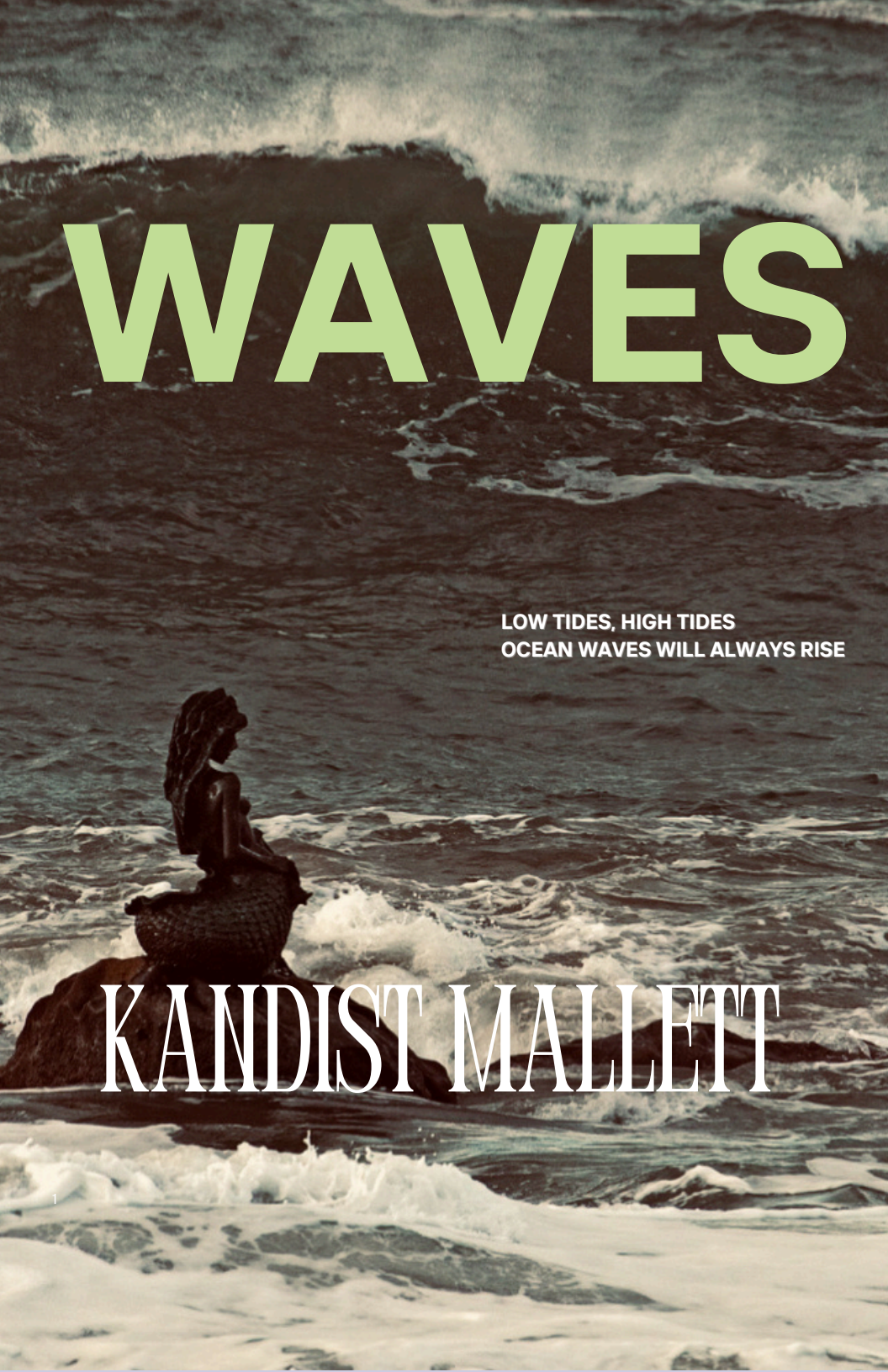


WAVES

LOW TIDES, HIGH TIDES
OCEAN WAVES WILL ALWAYS RISE

KANDIST MALLETT

FROM *THE* AUTHOR

Photo credit: Martin Vorel

IT IS EASY TO SAY ALL THESE WAVES WERE FOR NOTHING. BUT THAT'S SUCH A SMALL WAY TO SEE SOMETHING THAT IS SO GRAND.

This piece is dedicated to those who showed up. Who understood that hope and change came from the people not a politician. Who refused to let those in power remain unaccountable and who made sure that if there was no justice there would be no peace. To those in detention centers, black sites, prisons and jails around the world: we have not forgotten you. And we honor those who will never see another tomorrow by continuing to fight today.

Kandist Mallett

WAVES

The person who camped on the lawn of City Hall hoping to launch a revolution feels as distant to me as when I was a baby unable to hold up my neck. I search for her in my writing. In my dreams I relive her experiences. But no matter how much I try to find her, she is gone. I miss the way she saw the world. The belief she had in herself to change it. The belief that it could be changed. I didn't think I would become a jaded old radical. During Occupy I despised those people, who looked at us as if we were foolish to think it would last. They saw us as naive youth who'd go back to the shore once the storm cleared. But they were wrong. At least with me. I have been stubborn about my commitment to resistance. Even when I felt adrift, I've chosen to remain deep in the sea.

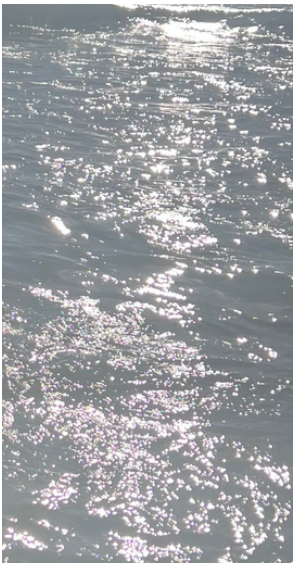


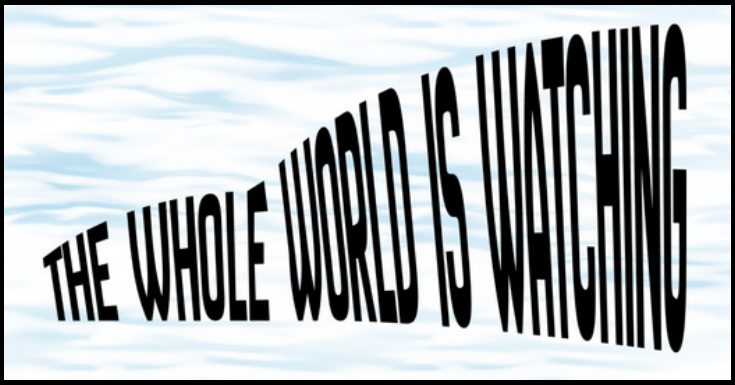
Photo credit: Kandist Mallett

IT'S BEEN 15 YEARS SINCE OCCUPY

This has marked a need for reflection.

I was two years out of college when I decided to set up a tent at Los Angeles' City Hall. After being told getting a degree was the key to success, I graduated into an economy where my degree meant nothing. I had moved back from teaching English in Viet Nam and got a job working as a legal secretary. Each day I was confronted with the indignity of work: The racist boss who made her disdain for my Blackness known, the senior attorney who traced the seams of my pants and the buttons of my blouse with his eyes. This type of treatment wasn't new. In school I learned the classics, chemistry, and how to develop shark-like skin for withstanding harassment. What got me through those long days in the office was listening to the radio. The voices of Margaret Prescod, Sonali Kolhatkar, and Amy Goodman were my escape. I listened as they interviewed people on the frontlines of the Arab Spring and the Wisconsin teacher's strike. I longed to join a similar movement. When I heard about Occupy Los Angeles I knew that was my chance. I bought a tent and dove in head first.

We were building a new world, and everyone was an architect. We had a people's print lab, where you could get shirts and bandanas. There was a kid's village, a people's university with free classes and a medical tent run by real nurses. The zero waste committee went through the rubbish, recycling and composting what they could. Actions committees planned the protests (though they felt like a front for the unions), and the food committee kept us well fed. The facilitation committee ran the general assemblies and smoothed out contentious meetings. This was where I found my place. I was immediately drawn to "the process," which used hand signals to manage gatherings. As an anxious introvert, it was heaven to convey through hand signs messages like "I want to speak" and "I don't agree with you" and "hey, you're talking too much." I also found the nature of horizontalism appealing. It felt like a refuge from the hierarchical structure I was forced to endure at work.



At first the media and political establishment supported us. That changed once it became obvious that we weren't going to be the Democrat version of the Tea Party. The okay was given to raid the encampment; we held our general assembly knowing an attack was imminent. I had just finished facilitating that night when the bright floodlights shined down on us. Police officers in helmets stormed out the doors of City Hall and popped up from tunnels I didn't even know were there. We were surrounded. I had seen videos of the raids at different encampments across the country, but that still hadn't prepared me for the experience. What I remember most are the officers' faces. Swollen with an intensity like they had spent all day preparing for battle against an enemy they did not know but had been warned about, swinging their black batons with medieval fury. One of them launched towards me, beating his stick toward my body. "The whole world is watching," I screamed. I linked arms with others and yelled louder. "THE WHOLE WORLD IS WATCHING." As if yelling the words loud enough could shield me.

In addition to the physical violence, there was a kind of psychological repression. This came in the form of misinformation, hypercritical media coverage, and an effort to minimize and erase the wave's impact. After the initial burst of coverage Occupy was treated as a joke by the mainstream media. Bill Maher called us douchebags who needed to get jobs. But Bill didn't always see Occupy that way. He was one of the many celebrities that came to our encampment. That was the shitty thing about Occupy Los Angeles, every "douchebag" celebrity who thought they were smart wanted to be there. During one visit Bill was asked what he admired most about Occupy. "Getting people to the streets," he said. "People are finally starting to talk about jobs." He was right. When Occupy started, the conversations and debates happening in DC were centered on spending and deficits. Occupy pushed politicians to talk about economic inequality. It paved the way for Bernie Sanders in 2016 and for DSA to build the organization it has now. Where we lost Bill, and others like him, was when we grew more vocally anti-capitalist, and when black blocs began destroying property at other occupations. But even with the use of controversial tactics, at that point Occupy had already shifted the discourse away from fiscal budgets and toward class warfare.

People may ask, what did Occupy lead to — what did it produce? It makes sense in a capitalist society that we would look at the success and failure of social movements in this way. It's not to say that movements shouldn't be critiqued. In the thick of my resistance days, we ended every protest and political gathering with a debrief. This culture of debriefing happened in person with our affinity groups and also through our writings. These were good faith critiques in strategy and tactics. It was coming from people who were at actions. Or at least were active on a similar level. This changed greatly with movement influencers on social media. People who hadn't been to an action, organized one, or even participated in movement spaces, could now accumulate huge platforms by talking about protests, using radical jargon, and sharing videos of unrest without having had to establish any sort of credibility or responsibility to the communities they were speaking on. Back in my day it was frowned upon to be an armchair activist. Now they just set up a tripod and yap away. This culture has created a false sense of expertise and knowledge. Most people are completely ignorant about the past movement waves but consider themselves knowledgeable. This arrogance extends throughout politics and has made us susceptible to media manipulation and political opportunism.

Occupy had its problems. It had elements of racism, sexism and classism. We all went in as our imperfect selves and tried to fix a broken society.

Photo credit: Shade

The narrative that we failed for being "directionless" and "leaderless" is boring and wrong. But where Occupy faltered was its inability to confront the same systems of hierarchy that plague our country. When Trayvon Martin was murdered by the wannabe pig George Zimmerman, it ignited a movement of Black youth who forced the country to talk about race and anti-Blackness. It also impacted movement spaces. No longer was it okay to simply name capitalism without talking about how the system of capitalism exploits some people more than others. By the time Michael Brown was murdered by that pig in Ferguson, those who may have been deterred by the whiteness of Occupy now had a wave of their own. The Ferguson Uprising reminded young Black people that every now and then you must burn shit down.

"THE FERGUSON UPRISING REMINDED YOUNG BLACK PEOPLE THAT EVERY NOW AND THEN YOU MUST BURN SHIT DOWN."

Photo credit: St. Louis Post-Dispatch

WOKE 1

Here we arrive to the origin point of “Woke 1,” a phrase based on an idea rooted in a word that is now so bastardized it’d be better to never mention it again. But that won’t happen, so let’s understand what we’re talking about here. There was a point where the Ferguson uprising became the beginning of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and the founders of that nonprofit organization were christened by the media as our anointed leaders. Perhaps they didn’t know, when they arrived in St. Louis on a caravan, that the media would move the focus away from residents on the ground and onto them instead, eventually granting them magazine covers and social media notoriety. This led to windfalls of cash and power via the non-profit sector and academia. But there was a moment when all those things began to come their way and they were credited for birthing a new wave of resistance, and instead of saying, “No, that credit does not belong to us,” they continued to profit off of young Black people who were actually putting their livelihoods and lives on the line. They were called out by those who were active in Ferguson and by other Black radicals, including me. It was understood in the community that BLM did not speak for Black resistance, and that they were in fact co-copters trying to make a buck off the movement. Yet their platforms continued to grow. The media called every Black rebellion #BlackLivesMatter and sought quotes from our appointed leadership whenever another Black person got killed.

Fast forward to 2020. George Floyd is murdered by that pig in Minneapolis. Riots ignite across the country. People are in lockdown, but protesting seems to be the only socially acceptable thing they can do to get out of the house. So they're going and posting pictures of themselves out there. I'm getting texts about the unrest from people who thought I became a weirdo after Occupy. Now they want to get involved. They're donating to Black Lives Matter, which raises $90 million. Some well-connected justice non-profits are also flooded with donations. People who identify with other marginalized communities begin speaking out as the conversation around oppression widens. Unlike Occupy, George Floyed would produce deliverables. And it was money, money, and money. There was a whole industry of "wokeness" that was formed and labeled as "social movement work." Corporations paid for influencers and academics to teach them about race, gender, and class. Democrats wore kentes and took a knee. Biden was elected. We got our first Black woman vice president. It seemed as if we were in the middle of a cultural shift in America.

But all that shifting created resentment. White people were tired of being told they're racist. Men were tired of being told they're toxic. Cis people were tired of being told they're cis. Media commentary changed. Behind the scenes, editors became less interested in covering the political repression that followed the riots. We began to see stories questioning BLM's founders' intentions. "The movement" is starting to look corrupt. At the same time we're seeing grumblings from corporate leadership about empty office spaces and entitled workers. They're blaming Biden and the pandemic-era social safety net for rising inflation, and scapegoating the movement for fake high crime rates. People start hurting financially again. Companies start laying people off while the cost of living rises. So now people are being economically squeezed and need someone to blame. Whites and cis-men are told to blame Biden's DEI for why there are few jobs. Trump is re-elected. Democrats blame the movement. The country sinks into a kind of idiotic authoritarianism. And then, six years after one of the greatest rebellions in modern U.S. history, our most prominent "leftist" politician goes on TV and says, "Woke 1 was crazzzy."

I found AOC's comment to be such a beautiful example about how collective mismemory and ignorance of movement waves work in real time. These politicians are like *this movement wanted to defund the police. That was going too far. That was crazy.* But did "the movement" want to defund the police? And if so, who declared this? Were there general assemblies at the riots, was there a demands list issued that I didn't know about? What movement are we talking about here? And more importantly, who gets to speak for that movement?

One of the most inspiring moments that I experienced at Occupy LA was when we passed the Statement of Autonomy, declaring our non-affiliation with any political organization or party. The statement concluded that no one speaks for OLA except for the general assembly. It protected us from individuals and organizations claiming to negotiate on behalf of the occupation. The George Floyd wave didn't have that. Riots are organic and unpredictable by nature. There were no principles of solidarity other than a desire to fuck shit up. Like a tsunami, riots are a culmination of events that create a force of energy strong enough to break past the shoreline and crash through city centers, destroying all kinds of property.

So while some organizations and prominent academics may have called for defunding the police, the tsunami in which nearly 14,000 people were arrested did not. That's not to say that people don't support cutting police budgets. But if we're issuing demands for what we want to come out of these protests, then the process should include the people who participated in them. When I talked to people who were arrested and imprisoned about their reasons for going out to the streets, the central theme seemed to be that they were tired of getting fucked over. They lost their job, were broke, and felt alienated. They wanted autonomy and more of a say over their future. And while reallocating police funds to public services is a good demand, perhaps it fails to capture the strength of a resistance that saw the rich and powerful hiding in their bunkers.

Photo credit: Emiliano Arano

Photo credit: Lucid Surfer

I have my own regrets about that moment. I wish I had tried to organize a general assembly in Los Angeles once the riots began to fizzle. But there are always realities that are difficult to contend with. The first among them is the green room, a surfing term that describes what it's like to be in the barrel of an ocean wave. In this case, the green room refers to the euphoric moment when you're in the peak of a movement wave and it feels like that sense of collective strength will last forever. In those moments, it's almost a betrayal to acknowledge that the wave's power is temporary and needs to be redirected into something more sustainable. For those deep in it, such suggestions can feel like heresy. The green room is disorienting, drawing out time and amplifying a sense of self importance. There is a frenzied pressure to continue protesting, rallying, making the absolute most out of this precious, unprecedented time. But then the wave comes crashing down and you're hit with the reality that the system you were trying to destroy is still there. This creates sadness, a state of loss. And because this grief is often experienced alone, after the collective spirit has dissipated, the loneliness feels much more profound. We don't collectively mourn the death of a movement, instead we are told that we must heal from the trauma on our own.

PHOTO SOURCE: TWITTER

Eventually the plywood comes off the windows, the graffiti is removed, and the streets are calm again. We forget our shared defiance and what it felt like to own the pavement. The longer the movement is in a lull, the easier it is for our memory to get manipulated. Who holds these digital artifacts of our history? You don't think to archive stuff as it's happening. To stop as the wave is at its peak and say, "someone should be saving all of this." Maybe we would now. I never journaled during Occupy, or during any of the other waves. My closest thing to a diary was my published writing. And who knows how long that'll be on the net. We put too much trust in digital platforms. We thought Twitter would honor the commons and faithfully store all our records. Our many Tweets exposing the grifters, calling out the abusive behavior, the videos of actions, the pictures of unrepeatable moments: poof! Now the surveillance state might be the largest holder of our records, with exclusive access to some of our most private collections. We must fight to hold onto the truth of these memories and reject the doublethink of the authoritarian regimes that actively try to erase them.

Photo credit: Kandist Mallett

A few years ago I interviewed a man from Ferguson named Steven Martin. He was there when people burn down the QuckTrip. He looted a Footlocker, got some shoes for himself and handed out the rest. He was arrested and did some time. When I asked why he went out there, he told me one of his friends was killed by the police and that the cops often harassed him. He didn't go to Michael Brown's vigil with the thought, I want police to start wearing body cameras, but he wanted justice. Steven and others released their rage and frustration by burning down the QuikTrip and looting stores. Images of the gas station aflame prompted the national media to cover the story. Steven died this year, but his role in pushing the tide forward in Ferguson will be felt forever. He and all those who participated in these rebellions deserve more than to be referred to as some laughable moment, some wild and regrettable time in our society. When people show up and try to hold power accountable, it's a courageous and honorable act.

IMAGE DESIGN: KANDIST MALLETT SOURCED PHOTO CREDIT: FIRST PHOTO (AZUMI79), SECOND PHOTO (CHRIST PIETSCH/THE REGISTER GUARD), THIRD PHOTO (ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH) NO LLM WAS USED IN THIS CREATION

It would be wrong to see the 2020 rebellion as an isolated incident. Watching the Third Precinct burn down in Minneapolis made me remember the nights I would stay up on Twitter as the Ferguson pigs launched chemical munitions at people's homes, when I thought that by sharing and engaging and witnessing, we were fighting back. So many similar moments from that decade: George Floyd, Ferguson, Standing Rock, Baltimore, Trayvon, NATO 2012, Anaheim, Occupy. These ruptures filled us with the intense pleasure of realizing that we are alive to demonstrate our agency. And that's just in the U.S., because we were all inspired by Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, Spain, Greece, Mexico and Sudan. Every time an uprising happens, it inspires others. It exists in our mind as an option. A weapon of defense. And it keeps the culture of resistance alive. I saw it in LA during an early anti-ICE protest in 2025. The scene felt familiar to the ones in 2020, but people were also using umbrellas to fight against tear gas, a tactic that was popularized by Hong Kong. It is easy to say all these waves were for nothing. But that's such a small way to see something that is so grand. These waves are a part of a larger ocean. The movement has been around since humans first existed. It's a physical and collective expression of desire to be free. The fight for that freedom. It will never end. The success is that we are still trying. That despair has not won.

The billionaires and despots want us to feel siloed in our digital chambers of doom. That is because alienation is a fascist's greatest weapon. It's what makes political repression acceptable to a society. The alienated voice tells you to worry about your own life, your own family, keep your head down and ignore what the government is doing. But there is great danger in listening to that voice, because it can easily turn into a fascist one. What is the alienated voice saying to you now about this very moment in history? We are at a point where the techno-fascists want to dictate what it means to be alive, to redefine life itself. They speak about a post-democratic world where "AI" has taken over much of our thinking, while we're forced to live under their serfdom. They want us to fear the future because they want us to believe the battle is over, that we've already lost. But the future is not something to fear. It is something to reclaim.

I wish I could have bottled the feeling of what it was like to be fully immersed in Occupy, the world around me uplifted by people-powered revolutions taking over public spaces and toppling tyrants. If I had, I would take a sip every now and then for myself and save the rest for my daughter, so she could know what that type of hope feels like.

Or perhaps she will find what the sea tastes like on her own.

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