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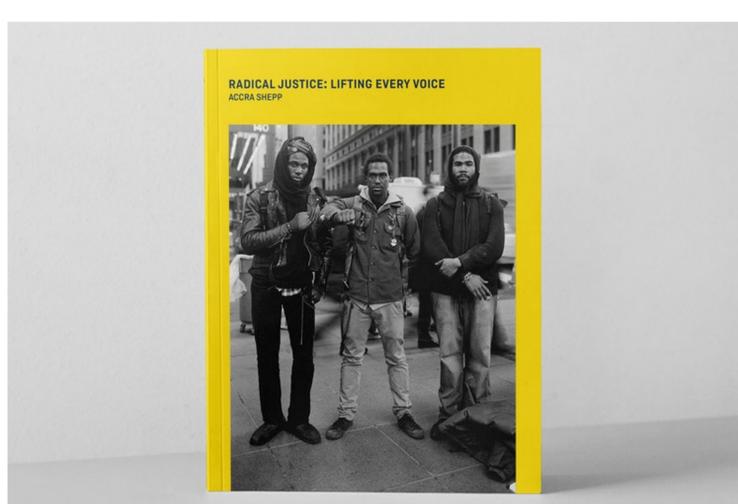
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Accra Shepp's *Radical Justice: Lifting Every Voice*

These portraits of protesters fill critical gaps in the narrative around the haves and have-nots.

By [Lee Ann Norman](#)

Accra Shepp
Radical Justice: Lifting Every Voice
(Convoke, 2022)

Accra Shepp never thought of himself as a documentarian, though his sense of artistic responsibility to highlight that which might go unnoticed and to look closely compelled him to consider how images can help us understand the human condition more clearly. *Radical Justice: Lifting Every Voice* brings together two bodies of Shepp's work—photographic portraits of people protesting in Zuccotti Park during the Occupy Wall Street movement in Lower Manhattan in 2011 and the racial justice protests across New York City throughout the summer of 2020. The book, filled with hundreds of black-and-white images, also features an introduction by the scholar and critic Salamishah Tillet serving as a bridge between these two moments and an essay by the artist reflecting on how photographs tell the stories of justice movements.

Shepp's photographs continue the legacy of German portrait and documentary photographer August Sander (1876–1964), who is most known for his work to make a record of farmers, artists, women, and the unhoused in twentieth-century Germany. From impromptu stagings to intentional snaps, Shepp's portraits fill critical gaps in the narrative around the haves and have-nots during this dynamic time in New York City. “As an artist, as a photographer, there is an implicit responsibility to see, a responsibility to examine and make visible those things that might go unnoticed or unnoted,” Shepp writes. “This obligation arises from the way images speak to us about our history ... and eventually become the fabric of the culture they describe.”

Occupy began in response to the economic fallout of the housing crash in 2008. As *Radical Justice* notes, there are very few formal documentations of the Occupy movement, so much of what is known lives in the collective memory, which is often wonderfully flawed. Besides anarchist Marisa Holmes's 2016 documentary *All Day All Week: An Occupy Wall Street Story*, *Radical Justice* is the only formal document of this foundational movement. Initially, mainstream media outlets were not paying attention to the grassroots occupation of Zuccotti Park; reports of activities were very light on details. When news outlets did begin paying closer attention to this growing movement, it was often portrayed as dominated by white people, particularly men. Shepp, who regularly visited the park during the protests—initially without his camera—observed something different: young, old, white, Black, Indigenous, Asian, and other people of color united together across lines of class and difference. Some people were there for the long haul, setting up camp and assisting with creating infrastructure, such as a free kitchen, laundry, personal hygiene stations, a library, and a medical tent, to support protesters. Others would stop by on their lunch break, after work, or between classes to show solidarity.



After first coming to the park out of curiosity, Shepp returned to document what he realized was a radical experiment to demand economic and social justice and accountability from those in power. He used an early version of a view camera that sits on a tripod and has an accordion bellows, typically used for large-format images. Shepp's view camera (made of wood and dating back to the 1930s) became an indispensable tool to accomplish his goals by providing an economical solution to getting images with very high resolution, into the gigabytes. This allowed him to document the protests with stunning clarity.

Most of Shepp's subjects meet the camera's gaze with a defiant calm that belies the precarity of the moment. People holding protest signs with slogans referring to the late economist Milton Friedman's free-market economic theories; the influence of corporate lobbyists and the blindness of justice; the difference between protest and resistance; and straightforward demands for justice for those murdered by the police. One woman even artfully turns herself into a human protest sign, as she wears a small sign around her neck stating that the space of her being is occupied—she is present.

Occupy's horizontal, distributed leadership model and grassroots approach would serve as a blueprint for future justice movements, including the Movement for Black Lives (#BlackLivesMatter) and #MeToo. And Shepp's use of black-and-white rather than color subtly disrupts the common narrative of young white men dominating the Occupy movement. “Shepp's black-and-white photographs dissolve the boundaries between individual and the collective, reminding us that each person who was present (even the police officers, the newscasters, and the anti-Occupiers) was a fundamental player in this revolutionary moment,” Salamishah Tillet writes in the forward. This artistic choice also underscores the intersectional nature of the 2020 racial justice protests. “And for the first time in my memory, everyone—Black, white, Latino, Asian, indigenous, gay, trans—everyone came together as a community to say, ‘No,’” Shepp writes. No “to every ‘norm’ that supported the underlying laws and social structures that permitted and supported this type of behavior.” While many of the officers in Shepp's photos avoid looking at the camera directly, a few do stare back. A masked Officer Soto from the Transit Bureau, stands for a portrait as she observes the Defund the Police rally held at City Hall on June 25, 2020, her eyes hint at a smile, but her face mask obscures the obvious clue. Officer Reilly of the 1st Precinct stands in front of a barricade on November 7, 2011—one week before police cleared Zuccotti Park—his eyes alert and curious, and the corners of his mouth turned down without producing a legible frown.

Shepp's photographs serve as a cultural record, demonstrating that the moral arc of the universe is indeed long, but where it bends—toward justice or injustice—is yet to be determined. To conclude his reflections on the work, Shepp wonders how we train authority figures—the police, politicians, lawmakers—to see the world in a way that recognizes our shared humanity. Although he acknowledges that Occupy changed how we thought in a few weeks without the aid of technology, he also notes that change is fleeting. Photography—by capturing feelings, emotions, actions, and outcomes—can prompt change in ways that a call to action cannot. Creative storytellers can use their art to make space for empathy and humanity to appear, assisting those who dream of a better world gain momentum in those efforts.

Contributor

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