

The Full Story of the 2009 Convergence

CrimethInc.

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While our last report focused on the controversial disruption, the 2009 CrimethInc. Convergence went on for five days and four nights before that incident, and many positive things occurred during that time. People exchanged skills and knowledge, built relationships that will last for years to come, and participated in a self-organized, affirmative event full of exciting and fun moments. What follows here are a few personal accounts focusing on these aspects of the convergence.

Learning, Growing, Failing: One Organizer's Perspective

The first night of the CrimethInc. Convergence, around ten o'clock, I descended into a furious assembly of everyone who had arrived prepared to give a workshop or decided five minutes prior that they had something to share. Fifty to seventy people had gathered and were buzzing with conversation; the room almost seemed to have an electric charge. I had written emails for months encouraging friends and contacts to present creative, relevant and challenging workshops, and now the moment had arrived to make the schedule concrete. It was more hectic than I can describe; I was completely overwhelmed at the task of figuring out where and when everything would happen. People began shouting out how things should proceed, and the word "chaotic" can only begin to describe that moment. But somehow we feverishly wrote down the titles of the workshops, assigned them to times and spaces during the week, and managed to leave space open for folks to add more as the week progressed and their courage increased. Over fifty workshops were scheduled on topics as diverse as one could imagine: intercepting secure communication, eating disorders in the radical community, social war, radical religion, G20 resistance, cultural appropriation, terrain analysis for demonstrations, the biopolitics of BDSM, acting, herbalism, critiques of insurrectionism, survival skills, gardening and plant identification are just the tip of the iceberg.

We created a skeleton for the next few days—needing some familiar structure to know how to come together and feel productive. As someone who has learned much about the world and our conflict with domination through workshops at gatherings like this, it was fulfilling to see this come together. As someone who has also felt the limitations of the workshop model, I saw how this framework fell into many of the same trappings. Many people expressed over the next few days that there were too many "101" or introductory workshops; at a convergence lasting a week we should have stressed that skillshares and trainings could build over the week in order to be more in depth and ambitious. I gave three workshops without ever having presented one at an anarchist gathering before. It was a tremendous learning experience and allowed me to connect in invaluable ways to people who came to the Convergence.

Many things flowed beyond this structure, even though it may seem to be at the center of what went on. Late night parlor games and post-midnight games of Go, evening soccer games, and an inventive combination of basketball and dodgeball. Three free and glorious meals every day—it must be stressed that the cooks this year really raised the bar and deserve mountains of praise for their hard work. Handfuls of people learned to fix the plumbing as the toilets broke or started leaking. Letters were written to prisoners, masses of free literature given out. There were bicycle rides to the magical and abandoned secret spots of Pittsburgh. On quiet walks through the cemetery and the streets of Bloomfield, I felt my connections to friends and comrades strengthen as we discussed our shared frustrations, joys, histories and desires. All this helped to make me

feel surrounded by others who are also trying so very hard to live anarchist lives despite the resistance we all face.

As a local organizer at the center of it all, I won't deny we made mistakes. Many mistakes. We have a lot of difficult questions now to face, a lot of consideration and reflective work to struggle with. There is some uncertainty about our collective ability to continue to participate in anarchist activities. But I for one would still rather have failed, and continue to fail, at something monumental than succeed at mediocre endeavors. The routines and roles of our milieu are easy to fall into and become content with. My lasting impression of the CrimethInc. Convergence, however, does not make me want to retreat from new projects into a place of security and safety. Instead I believe we must try harder still to reinvent and experiment with what it means to be an anarchist and the ways in which we can act to confront hierarchy and domination in our lives and in the world at large. **Free Clinic and First Aid**

With the help of many others, I organized a temporary free drop-in clinic in Garfield that ran concurrently with the CrimethInc. Convergence, but was located down the street at the Greater Pittsburgh Anarchist Collective's community space. The aim of the free clinic was to offer accessible "alternative" healthcare to the broader Pittsburgh/Garfield community. People who were attending the convergence were also invited to drop in. The clinic offered consultations and treatments with a qualified acupuncturist and herbalist. People came to the free clinic with a variety of questions and needs. Acupuncture was done on site using a "community clinic" setup, which allows one practitioner to treat multiple people at the same time. Herbal remedies were suggested, and sometimes formulated on site free of charge. The clinic ran for four consecutive days, and was well-received by locals and convergence attendees alike.

This year I also helped to coordinate the first-aid space at the convergence. This was located in a small nook in an upstairs room, and was used by a variety of people for many different things—counseling, acupuncture, herbal consultations, treatments for acute symptoms, massage, and as a sleeping spot when necessary. The first-aid space was well stocked with herbal medicines, and personal formulas were put together by herbalists as needed. I felt there was a good balance between treating both chronic and acute symptoms using a variety of "alternative" medicine and standard first aid. I thoroughly enjoyed helping with the first-aid space, and I hope to see more multi-disciplinary health care spaces at future convergences/gatherings as well as longer-term projects in our communities.

I Am, but It Was Not, a Bummer: 2009 and the CrimethInc. is Easy

At its best, the CrimethInc. Convergence is a last-chance saloon for weirdoes who can't find a place at any other gathering: those too sober for Rainbow, too useless for activist conferences, too shy for book fairs, too confused for academic seminars. Anarchist schlemiels. In a world without movement or community, it is one place where we can find each other to hook up and talk for a few days. I go to see a dozen friends from far-flung places and meet a few more, to present a new idea and stir things up. I have realized those desires every year.

At its worst, the convergence is a boiling pot of frustration and poor communication. This year we saw the worst very clearly on Friday night when accumulated anarchist (and—it needs

to be said—nationalist) insanity exploded into a mess of shouting, lost bags, and tears. That night casts a shadow on our memory, but there were other moments too.

I was tied to a St. Andrew's Cross and beaten with a book while shouting straightedge lyrics. I discussed Pynchon and literature with a wonderful stranger (Luca, whenever we meet again, I plan to make up for not having coffee with you that Friday night). I played many games of Go. I heard my poetry read aloud before a crowd and even read a bit myself. I solved a math riddle. I met a few new friends. I embraced old friends and found solace in their intelligence. I wrote hidden messages in the daily workshop schedules. I urged my compatriots to write fiction, or at least annotated editions of their favorite texts, rather than just recycling the same writings again and again. We were young, and the city was not ours, nor the building. The streets of Pittsburgh made as little sense as the content of the workshops. Tasks were organized by the usual organizers; workshops given by the same presenters. Though we lived those few days amongst the falling petals of disappointment and purple prose, I must say it was a fine summer week, despite everything.

A few ideas for next year: more collective activities, a game learned by all at the very beginning or a convergence-wide reading group of an original text never before seen; more problems, mysteries, and tasks that must be taken on in groups; more weakness, less hardening; a confusing series of five rendezvous points arbitrarily directing people to either of two convergence spaces that are near each other but unconnected; expanding the exclusion policy to include those who neglect their imagination; anything that will shift our definition of success away from reproducing earlier results; a dirtier sex party.

Romance and Strength

It is true that when it comes to the convergence, a big chunk of my heart is dedicated to thinking about identity politics. I don't want this account to be perceived as undermining the happenings around oppression during the convergence. But I want this account to be dedicated to other things I experienced during the convergence, and I think there should be a space for that as well.

Two other themes kept revisiting me during the convergence. The first was sweet romance. I live in a town where the activist community is very small. So when it comes to smooching, I have two choices, either to kiss someone who is not a radical—and deal with having a relationship with someone who have not thought about issues like sexism, homophobia and polyamory—or smooch a radical with whom I share a very small community. The trip up north meant growing excitement about going out of my usual radical dating pool.

Sex has always been something that felt very serious to me. As a female-bodied sexual assault survivor, sex often feels dangerous and unsafe. Being sexual with others often feels like opening the door to subjecting myself to objectification or worse. So before deciding to share my body with someone, there is always a long process of thinking about the pros and cons, and negotiating the terms of that decision with my potential partner. I went to the convergence with a recognition that sex should be a little lighter. I decided that during my trip I will follow my lust without fearing the consequences, and so I did. During the convergence I felt I had space to develop crushes and even fall in love. The convergence gave me a really good space in which to discover that sex doesn't have to be very serious, it can also be something goofy and fun. I feel like even

now, after weeks back home, I have managed to let go of my fears and see the beauty in people around me.

The relationships I created during my trip also helped me remember that sometimes love can be easier than we think. Sitting on the grass with my grrrlz, having a crush debrief, I was reminded again how romantic relationships should look. We are all connected to one another until we decide to put boundaries between us. And so I share with my ex's lover my difficulties with that new established friendship, and they sit there and listen, giving me support. Another person in our circle declares how important it is for them to have the back of their lovers' lovers. Yes, polyamory is possible, in the best way there is. I am reminded that relationships are not something that happens between two people, but something that happens between all of us.

The second theme that reoccurred during my trip was rediscovering things that have been hiding under my nose all along. During the convergence I felt so much pride, pride of who I am and where I am from. I felt joy every time I got to introduce myself and say "NC pride!" Before going to the convergence I was scared of what it would be like. I imagined a scenario in which I would be alone, and have difficulty making friends. Instead I found myself feeling like a part of a crew, and feeling like I have a group of friends that have my back. It felt so good to see my friends perform in the Cabaret and I was able to say "those are my friends" with a proud grin on my face. It felt so amazing to be held in my friends' arms when I was having a hard time. I definitely feel I am where I want to be, surrounded by people I truly love. It's funny to travel that far just to rediscover how amazing my home is, but one of the main lessons I am taking from the convergence is that as far as I am concerned is that NC is the place to be.

Understanding the importance of my community is strongly linked to rediscovering what kind of person I am. The one cannot have happened without the other. I moved to the U.S. not so long ago, and have had a hard time ever since. I cannot explain the hardship of having to express yourself in a language that isn't your own, or trying to figure out what it means to be an experienced activist thrown into a totally new political context. It is walking around feeling like you don't belong, always feeling the pain of the culture you have left behind, but not being able to share that life with anyone. It feeling like there is never enough space for you, that you are crushed. I feel like since that change in my life, I was changed as a person and become someone else. I feel like I was erased.

Being in the convergence was the first time I felt like myself in a long time. I was loud, friendly, and talkative. I was aware of how strong and awesome I am with every step I took down the halls of the convergence space. I was able to show my love for others and to be open with them. I took space, but not for the sake of taking space, but for the sake of existing as I am. I was able to be completely myself, completely honest. And now, there is no way back. The convergence reminded me how it felt to not compromise on being and doing what I want, and I am not willing to give that up. Ever. I am going to live to the extreme, to be as strong, as great, as loving and connected, as honest and as myself as I can. I am so grateful that I had a space to remember who I am, to remember how it feels to walk proud.

Defeat

Skirting the perimeter of the D.H. Lawrence Convention Center, moving quickly from car to car in an effort not to be seen by the opposing team, I knew my time was precious. I had scoured the

enemy territory for the flag and found nothing, and began to make my way to their jail to free my captured teammates.

Every object on a street looks different when you play Capture the Flag; a dumpster becomes a place to hide, an alley becomes an escape route, a doorway becomes a place to wait momentarily as an opponent runs past you. I inch forward, moving up the street from the convention center and crisscrossing between doorways that could conceal me. Around a corner and ducking behind the bushes in front of a hotel, I peer out to make sure the coast was clear. Carefully beginning to get up, I notice someone coming around the corner behind me. I break into a mad dash and the player wearing an orange arm-band is close at my feet. I jump over hedges and run between parked cars, the jail a mere block away. Panting and sweating I fly around the corner to see almost all of my team stuck in jail, and they look at me with wide eyes and begin to jump and shout. I'm so close, so tired, but I find some hidden cache of energy and run even faster, now followed closely by three or four others. "Run! Run!" they shout, "We know where the flag is!" I'm almost there, and it is my moment of glory: if I make it our victory is assured.

Mere seconds before I reach the jail, a mass of the other team emerges from an alley way, running in unison. I'm crushed to see that one of them holds our flag in her hand—the game is done, our team has lost. Exhausted I sit down and stare for a second at the dark streets of Pittsburgh and think about returning to this very spot in two months or so, after it has been transformed into a more serious battleground. I know these streets a little bit better now, and when I return in September that knowledge will likely prove invaluable. After the game's conclusion we walk over to a huge downtown fountain and go swimming as it thunders down rain. Against all logic and reasonable odds, the authorities don't even show up, and we splash and play with a fragile sense of invincibility.

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