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RADICAL MOTHERING FOR THE PURPOSES OF ABOLITION

Nadine Naber, Johnae Strong, and Souzan Naser

At the time of this writing, we are only halfway into 2020 and it has been a tumultuous six months. The initial effects of COVID-19 coupled with the current uprisings against police violence have torn us from our common sense of normalcy. We began the year with a deadly virus outbreak that still threatens the world. Declared a global emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30, the novel coronavirus continues to claim the lives of the most vulnerable among us in the United States, revealing all too quickly that racial capitalism, not simply COVID-19, is the disaster. We witness racial capitalism in the "denigration of the work of care"¹—as evidenced in the failure to provide personal protective equipment for care workers or large-scale testing across society. It flares up, too, in the generalized idea that the poor people of color and Indigenous people who disproportionately make up the vulnerable labor population of "essential" workers should die to save an economy that already exploits and devalues them.

The new year also started with the familiar and disturbing history of Black people being murdered at the hands of law enforcement officers. In addition to the February 23 murder of Ahmaud Arbery by a white father and his son and the March 13 murder of Breonna Taylor, an EMT and aspiring nurse, by Louisville police officers, George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old Black man, son, father, and brother, was killed by Minneapolis police on May 25. With his face pinned down on the

could concrete ground and the weight of officer Derek Chauvin's body pressed against his neck for over eight minutes, the final cries from George Floyd calling, calling, calling for his mother reverberated in the minds and hearts of mothers across the nation. As national protests erupted and filled the streets in the aftermath of his horrific murder, mothers, biological or not, responded politically to his murder and to all victims of state violence.

This sudden shift in the already toxic state of living brought about by the global pandemic and the violence of US empire building and racial capitalism across the globe affords us the opportunity to uplift centuries of communal wisdom that abounds all around us. In this moment of mass anxiety at the loss of work and economic security, the uprisings in the US have expressed righteous anger stemming from five hundred years of US settler and imperial state violence built into this country's laws and ingrained in its culture. They also express outright refusal of continued abuse by a country built on the mass genocide of Black and Indigenous peoples. Indeed, the condition for the existence of US empire is genocide, including ongoing systems of slavery and settler colonialism and expansion, including US support for Israeli settler colonialism. In the pages to come, we will see how these conjoined histories brought us together as activists and writers committed to a decolonial feminist abolitionist vision. While brought about by tragedy, this moment offers a profound opportunity to restructure not only such things as how we work, shop, and travel but also how we fight for an abolitionist future and care for one another.

In this essay, we focus on what social movements committed to prison abolition can learn from one group of people in particular: mothers and caretakers trapped within the prison-industrial complex. First, we argue that the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the mass mobilizations led by the movement for Black lives, affirm how racial capitalism and settler colonialism extend globally while reverberating back onto BIPOC lives and bodies in the US with distinct implications for people who mother. Second, we contend that mothering, defined broadly as the people conducting the labor of care, can light the way for our path forward, one that simultaneously

dismantles the world of policing while building a world where policing and prisons are no longer necessary. Third, we uplift what we call "identification on behalf of the collective," where we map a liberated methodology that positions the authors' struggles as mothers in solidarity with system-impacted people who mother, people who are themselves advancing a relational model of care that disrupts neoliberal individualized modes of relating. Fourth, the work of those system-impacted people who mother gives us a blueprint of how to realize a revolutionary movement.

Indeed, the invisible histories of state violence, particularly US state violence against Black mothers, are long and deep. They reach back centuries from the rape and sexual assault of enslaved African women as a means for reproducing enslaved people in service to white capita to the killing of black mothers like Korryn Gaines, whom police killed in her own apartment in front of her two children. Bearing witness to their mother's murder through injustice and police violence, Korryn's children will no longer know their mother's loving embrace or have her to tuck them into bed at night.

The stories of these lives bring to stark light a chilling fact: people who do the labor of mothering are expected to accelerate the progress of capital and serve as nurturers for their family and community systems, all while enduring systematic targeting, including murder, by the same state apparatus from which they are fighting to protect their loved ones. As a result, mothers trapped within the prison-industrial complex in one way or another have been modeling what it looks like to integrate care work (often conceived of as "service") and political organizing as part of a collective, revolutionary project.² Yet all along, the labor, visions, and strategies of these very individuals tend to remain invisible within many social movements in ways we now have an opportunity to uplift and reconsider.

There has long existed in many of our organizing spaces a silent devaluing of the realm of reproduction,³ including mothering and caretaking, whether biological or nonbiological. While those who are mothering attend, lead, and assume the responsibility of caretaker in organizing spaces, it is often true that our positions as anchors of

our movements' micro-communities are overlooked and not actively engaged as assets. The increased neoliberal professionalization of organizing puts pressure on movements to focus on and respond to questions about the metrics of productivity, such as, How many actions can be executed, how many members are joining, and how many dollars can be raised in grant funding? Core principles of relationship-building and collaborative thinking suffer due to the need for more campaigns, more rallies, and more wins—understandable priorities. On the ground, social movement resistance to the neoliberal professionalization of activism reinstates the discrepancy in value between “political organizing” and “service” and has the effect of intentionally or unintentionally reinforcing the devaluing of mothering and caretaking forms of labor.

Yet, we are now at a time when protesters facing white supremacy, brutal militarized policing, and heightened economic devastation require strategies of collective care more than ever before—including “feeding, clothing, and housing each other and those in need in their community based on the principles of reciprocity and solidarity.”⁴ We are reminded that the strength of our movements is tied with the strengths of our relationships, the depth of our connectedness, and the necessity of mothering at home, in the streets, and beyond.

Here, we deploy what we call liberated research methodologies that connect our own life histories to the work we do with our organization Mamas Activating Movement for Abolition and Solidarity (MAMAS) and with people who have been incarcerated themselves or who have children currently or previously incarcerated. We define mothering as caring activities that have historically been specifically gendered as female/feminine, while we recognize that such caring work is not performed exclusively by those recognized as women or by those biologically related to those receiving care. *Ultimately, our goal is to affirm that the labor of mothering in the context of state violence operates as an inherently radical act, and that political organizing and care work (especially reproductive labor) involve a permeable, interconnected relationality necessary to the labor of abolishing the prison-industrial complex and creating the alternative society abolitionists have been calling for.*

LIBERATED RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

We cofounded MAMAS in order to integrate the perspectives of people who mother into social movements, scholarly debates, media discussions, and policy processes about the systems that sustain US empire, white supremacy, including policing and prisons, immigration and colonization and war. All along, we have integrated the scholarship component of MAMAS with the public-facing activist, media, policy components through a set of liberated research methodologies. We operationalize liberated research methodologies to develop research through relationships of mutual trust, respect, and accountability; social movements and their needs and visions; produce research analysis for the purposes of social change and abolition; and disrupt power relationship between researchers and research participants.⁵

This essay is based on ideas that emerged within our working group on policing and prisons and interviews with working group members. The working group meets weekly (virtually during the global pandemic) as a space for healing and political strategizing. Our work intensified after COVID-19 began, when mother-survivors of police realized their loved ones were facing death in COVID-19-infested and prisons. Together, we integrate the voices of mother-survivors and prisons with social movements and protests, press conferences, and media debates about the impact of COVID-19 on prisons and the violence of policing in Chicago. We have also been sharing stories and interviewing each other to consolidate collective wisdom about radical mothering into a framework that can contribute to theories and practices of abolition.

To affirm a process of (collective-relational-dialectical) knowledge production, we map and analyze both how the authors' life conditions contributed to the kinds of questions our research asks about mothering and abolition and the stories of mother-survivors of police torturing and those of us authoring this essay and the people whose stories we write about. Yet we affirm that the authors' life stories and those of the mother-survivors we represent below amplify one another, and dialectically and relationally foster our collective theorization of radical mothering.

for the purposes of abolition. There is voluminous feminist literature on precisely this point. As in any research (although often denied by the violence of the academic-industrial complex / scientific objectivity), the historical and political conditions shaping the lives of the authors contribute as much to the production of knowledge as do the stories of the people the research represents.⁶ By positioning our life stories (as authors) into our analysis, we also seek to challenge the often sensationalized and objectified realities of Black and brown mothers trapped in the prison-industrial complex. As authors and analysts, the conditions shaping our own lives have helped us enter this project through a politics of solidarity, as we will see below, and to affirm the often unrecognized but necessary movement labor conducted by mother-survivors of police torture. All of us are part of this story.

INSPIRATIONS

We draw upon key themes emerging out of the intersection of feminist abolition and Black feminist thought. Abolition studies has established that the problem of prisons extends within and far beyond prison walls. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains, the expulsion of individuals from their communities creates “greater instability in a community of people,” especially since “households stretch from neighborhood to visiting room to courtroom, with a consequent thinning of financial and emotional resources.”⁷ In this sense, what takes place behind prison walls trickles down into neighborhoods and local families and communities. Therefore we refer to people who are mothering incarcerated people as survivors of prisons and police in their own right. As Mary L. Johnson, mother of Chicago police torture-survivor Michael Johnson stated, “As long as my son is doing life, I’m a lifer.”⁸ As survivors of police torture, the mental and physical health and economic realities of mother-survivors have been devastated by the police torture followed by the incarceration of their loved ones.

Abolitionist theories, specifically feminist abolition, have importantly insisted not only on the necessity of dismantling prisons but also on the necessity of building the alternative future society we want through

everyday practices in our lives now. Feminist abolitionist activists a community organizers—like Alisa Berría, Andrea J. Ritchie, B. E. Ritchie, Mariame Kaba, Shana M. griffin, Lee Ann S. Wang, Sh Hassan, Kelly Hayes, and many more—established the significance of politic that would both transform and care, dismantle and heal, based upon a collective commitment to guaranteeing the survival and care of all peoples.⁹

Their visions had everything to do with supporting people of color survivors of sexualized violence for whom relying on policing and prisons for justice only produced more harm. From this standpoint, Berría explains, they worked toward “community-based strategies for safe support, and accountability that [do] not rely upon police and prisons.”¹⁰ Berría, referring to the work of Communities against Rape and Abuse (CARA), says they “collaborated with survivors and their communities to develop ideas for meeting those survival needs collectively, an effort that became known as community accountability & transformative justice.”¹¹ Long before the term “abolition” became common framework for working to end the prison-industrial complex these scholar-activists committed not only to ending state and interpersonal violence but also to creating “a society based on radical freedom, mutual accountability, and passionate reciprocity.”¹² Essential to our analysis is the idea that abolition is not only a political vision about ending prisons and police but also a practice committed to creating new way of life that begins now. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, teaching us that abolishing the prison-industrial complex requires sustaining our

* See INCITE!’s “Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex”:

We seek to build movements that not only end violence, but that create a society based on radical freedom, mutual accountability, and passionate reciprocity. In this society, safety and security will not be premised on violence or the threat of violence; it will be based on a collective commitment to guaranteeing the survival and care of all peoples.

INCITE! Women of Color against Violence, “The Critical Resistance-INCITE! Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex,” in *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle against the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. CR10 Publications Collective (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2008), 25.

communities, says, “If we can feed and sustain each other, we have less need to call on or depend on the state or the status quo. The knowledge that we have communities of support can awaken our bravery and ignite our imaginations for a transformed world.” Gumbs adds, abolition “means freedom now and day by day. It means accountability and love growing everywhere.”¹²

Writing in 2020, we take up how abolitionists have been uplifting the concepts of care work and mutual aid to capture the kinds of practices necessary for the alternative society we are striving for. Mariame Kaba, organizer, abolitionist, and founder of Project NIA, teaches us that “everything worthwhile is done with other people.”¹³ Dean Spade describes mutual aid as “when people band together to meet immediate survival needs usually because of a shared understanding that the systems in place are not coming to meet them, or not fast enough—if at all.” Spade adds that individuals are most familiar with mutual aid efforts after a natural disaster like earthquakes or storms when people rescue each other or distribute food and water. However, other types of mutual aid efforts like childcare collectives, free food programs, community bail funds, and housing needs for formerly incarcerated individuals are essential to effect true change when the larger structures and systems we live under fail the most vulnerable among us.*

Spade provides a clear distinction between solidarity and charity, explaining that solidarity / mutual aid is “when people get together to meet each other’s basic survival needs and we can do it together RIGHT NOW!” Unlike charity, solidarity / mutual aid is a highly participatory process that builds people’s ability to mobilize. Charity, on the other hand, is a passive nonparticipatory process in which rich people or social service organizations give resources to individuals in need, and typically that support is conditional or comes with stipulations. The major difference between solidarity and charity is that with solidarity the focus is on the issues with the systems/structures in place, not the individuals. Another idea we might integrate is the Black feminist tradition that understands violence multi-dimensionally—intimate and imperial, economic and emotional, around the world and around the corner. Engaging political work on multiple registers like this is central to the heart of mutual aid because it helps us reimagine our scope of responsibility to one another. Dean Spade, “Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid and How to Organize in the Age of Coronavirus,” interview (with Mariame Kaba) by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now*, March 20, 2020, https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/20/coronavirus_community_response_mutual_aid.

Black feminist thought inspires our theorization of political mothering. A widespread feminist idea is that mothering is an inherently oppressive practice mired in the patriarchal nuclear family, lacking in possibilities for resistance and agency. This widely held convention frames mothering and activism as inherently conflictual though mothering is merely an unfairly gendered burden that confines women to a depoliticized heteropatriarchal private sphere. This analysis, mothers are merely extensions of their biological children.¹⁴ Yet histories of slavery and the brutality of racial capitalism including police violence, have intentionally targeted Black women’s reproductive capacities and politicized Black motherhood. Many feminists have affirmed that mothering has never been a sentimentalized identity confined to the domestic heteropatriarchal space of nuclear family. In the face of white supremacy and state violence, feminists like Patricia Hill Collins have asserted the significance of mothering beyond biology, or “other-mothering.” Collins argues mothering becomes a collective responsibility out of both the recognition of extended, multigenerational, African kinship structures and enslaved Africans *and* striving to protect and care for children neglected within collective struggles against racism.¹⁵ Gumbs disaggregates motherhood from biology through her definition of revolutionary mothering as less of a gendered identity and more of “a possible a technology of transformation that those people doing the most resisting are teaching us right now.”¹⁶ Since Black women’s reproductive labor has consistently been defined by the struggle to uplift Black people collectively in the face of racial domination, mothering is both healing, caring, and loving while resisting oppression. As Audre Lorde explains, raising Black children “in the mouth of a racist, suicidal dragon” requires teaching love, resistance, and survival if children are going to survive.¹⁷

We are specifically inspired by the idea that Black mothering is not only politicized but also essential to the liberation of Black people. Angela Davis writes that without Black women, the movement against slavery would have been delayed, or not reached the result it did. There were a necessity to fight back because they had the ability to accom-

things men couldn't. Black women could raise the master's children, come to know the family, and fight back from inside the home. They thought of everyone—even once their freedom was gained, the next goal was to buy back the freedom of their family. After that, they had the same strength to fight the same battles as the men.¹⁸ Lorde reminds us of the significance to both connect Black women across the world and commit to unbounding bio/cis/hetero/Eurocentric family formations. We too have witnessed what Lorde refers to as a global “history of the use and sharing of power.” She explains this “sharing of power from the Amazon legions of Dahomey . . . to the economically powerful market-women guilds of present West Africa . . . [a] tradition of closeness and mutual care and support.”¹⁹ We believe, as Lorde teaches us, that the courage of all of those who mother to bring the fullness of our warrior spirits is embodied in dispossessed women all over the world who strategize clever and sustaining ways to resist and care for their loved ones with babies on their backs, both biological and non-biological. Lorde described the pervasive language of governments as “calculated to reduce a Black nation’s aspirations in the eyes and ears of white Americans.”²⁰ We, as radical people who mother in solidarity with dispossessed mothers in other nations name the ways in which this language has reared its ugly head in the transnational spaces of Chicago. It relates to our mothering specifically as we have felt the subconscious subscription to heteropatriarchal politicization of mothering as a burden to the more urgent “work” of our organizing spaces and we have felt the cries of children as a delay to meeting progress and over time. Yet we have persisted to transform spaces so that they involve sharing food and childcare, having breaks at meetings, and placing children at the center. We hold these as values of care, all expanded by those who are mothering. Indeed, we have witnessed tactics of “care bears” at direct actions, jail support, cop watching, and the like as deeply interwoven with a politics of care passed down through our cultural sensibilities and our shared global histories as BIPOC armed with the necessity to always think of the collective.

This intervention is necessary at a juncture in history where distance and capitalist competition and individualism are increasingly pervasive.

Here, we demand that care be increasingly understood, as we understood it, as critical to our survival. Bringing the idealized mothering and the necessity of mothering to resistance refers to revolutionary mothering as the “lifeforce toward we can only transform together.” In this sense, our working idea of activating mothering as a mechanism (or tool) of resistance. By bringing together abolitionist feminism and Black feminism we propose the framework of radical mothering for abolition recognize the conditions of state violence that inspire radicalizing and the kinds of care work that take the form of reproduction (such as raising and caring for children) that are necessarily dismantling systems of prisons and policing and building societies through our everyday life practices, rooted in community relationality, and love.

MOTHERING IS A RADICAL ACT

The authors of this text were activists before we were mothers in relationship to our biological children was not the impetus for our activism. Mothers can be politicized in many ways, not just heteropatriarchal ways mother-activists tend to be recognized in terms of their reproductive capacities, for instance, as martyrs or as faces/symbols/emblems of the land/nation. Mothering expanded the scope of our activism, into relationships to mothering that were rooted in, while transcending, our relationship to our children. We map and analyze the conditions that led us to perceive radical mothering as an abolitionist strategy because our own experiences and analyses are intertwined with those of our comrades, the mother-survivors of police torture and state violence above. Long before we began mothering our own children we witnessed radical mothering across multiple global contexts. Our commitment to mapping and analyzing radical mothering was born out of witnessing how mothering and activism enhance and sustain each other. Our commitment was born out of tradition we recognized in the devaluing of reproductive

our organizing spaces despite its necessity to sustaining and expanding movement activities—from protests to sit-ins to mass mobilizations. This recognition inspired each of us to approach political organizing differently and to ultimately form our collective together. Here, we name and highlight the conditions that activated us into seizing the possibilities of radical mothering, many of which extend far beyond our own biological motherhood and are essential to imagining abolitionist futures. In this sense, we seek to disrupt the normative gendered concepts that attempt to define social movements—from “the radical man-hero” to the “woman as symbol of the nation” (whether mother of martyrs or emblems of the land or the people) and to affirm mothering itself as a radical act.

Johnaé Strong: As a Black woman, I was raised to see the connection between my family and the families around me, in each city I lived from Detroit, Michigan, to Shelby, North Carolina. Whether I was in Honduras or Ghana, Togo or France, the oppression of people of African descent across the globe resulting from global white supremacy and anti-Blackness was always clear and palpable. Living in the US for most of my life, I am always inspired by comrades who led the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa when they said, “If you want to help Africa, dismantle the beast of Imperialism and White Supremacy in America.”²² I found hope in the collectives of Mamas and Babas and young people on the African continent who take care of one another as second nature. I realized the powerful notion of collectivism has not been lost. Now that I must consider my two young children and husband as I fight for a free society, whether subconsciously or consciously, this practice of interconnectiveness has deepened my approach to organizing. Mainly, my children have awakened my first vocation in collective education and teaching.

One morning my daughter, Jari, woke up muttering, “I tried to broke the jail and I couldn’t broke it.” She is three years old. Sitting in the backyard in Chicago one afternoon, we saw the blue lights flashing down the street and my son, Akeim, became visibly upset and pushed himself under my arm for me to hold him. Akeim has been to almost every protest I participated in between 2013 and 2018 and knows the

chants and songs by heart and has his own critical analysis of the police. More than that, he is seven years old and clings to his mother every time he is afraid. It is with this lived experience, inspired by historical collectivism across the African continent, that I come to the work I do. I earnest for responses that span beyond a moment and solutions that sustain a movement for liberation for my family, for your family, for all families.

Organizing for Black lives in Chicago reinforced my interest in alternative organizing strategies. On the anniversary of the death of Rekia Boyd, as a leader of Black Youth Project 100 Chicago chapter, I brought several members to support another organization in a protest action in front of the house of Dante Servin, the officer who murdered Rekia. In a matter of a half hour, my comrades and I were surrounded by three police cars full of cops, and a drunk Servin and his girlfriend came outside with a video camera. As several of our folks were being arrested and yelled at Servin and the officers that “Rekia should be free,” I heard officers demand we stop “being aggressive.” Everything I did was to body clenched tight as I realized we could potentially not make it out of this situation alive; I could possibly not make it to my son Akeim. At 5’3” and 125 pounds, I shouted with every ounce of strength I had for all my folks to get into our cars and leave while we could. The police home was silent and without words. I swore I would never risk my life or my children for anything I was not sure would lead to tangible liberation or sustained liberation for my people. I came to believe that work is not less loud and positions healing justice, caretaking, and collectivizing strategies to build up a community capacity beyond protest.

Souzan Naser: This work is deeply personal to me. I was born in Palestine and raised on the southwest side of Chicago, in the heart of one of the largest, concentrated Arab American communities in the US. I am a second-generation community activist who grew up in the ranks of the Arab Community Center. As a young girl I observed my parents’ and their comrades’ commitment to this center. Reproductive forms of labor, such as feeding each other, opening our homes to the movement, and caring for the sick and elderly were integrated into our strategies for building a base. I watched with a keen eye as these

fighters for justice dedicated their time and energy to advance both the social and political work of my community. As children, we learned our passion for Palestinian liberation from our elders who passed on sensibilities of hope and resistance to children. Our mothers and aunts especially enveloped young people into our community organizations through dance and other art-based programming.

They prepared me for my trips back home to Palestine and where I witnessed firsthand the violent and oppressive conditions that my people are living under—from Israel's use of mass incarceration to its systematic attacks on Palestinian women's bodies as an attack on Palestinian reproduction to caging my people behind walls and borders, all to further the US-backed, Zionist project of settler colonialism. Throughout my life, I saw Black struggle in the US as a mirror of what I witnessed back home. In Chicago, I have been involved in actively integrating the work of the US Palestinian Community Network with the struggle for Black lives. This connection has been decades in the making as Black and Palestinian movements have grown hand in hand. Once I became a mother, my political commitment grew. I further cemented my determination to contribute to raising politically conscientious youth who will stand firm, rooted, and grounded in the liberation of Palestine and of oppressed people across the globe.

As people revolted against the depths of racial inequality in the US on June 5, 2020, thousands of miles away in Palestine, my people were revolting. US police violence against Black people and protesters continues to resemble Israeli state violence against Palestinians protesting the colonization of their land.

When I first met the mother-survivors of police torture through my work with MAMMAS, I immediately understood the brutality of state-sanctioned violence that has been trickling down from the incarceration of their sons into their own everyday lives. Only five days after the murder of George Floyd, a thirty-two-year-old autistic Palestinian man, Eyad al-Hallaq, was shot and killed by Israeli police forces while walking to his special-needs school. Despite his caregivers' pleas—"He's disabled!" and "I'm with him!"—the Israeli forces shot him three times in close range with a rifle. Like US police who kill Black people, Israeli officers

who murder Palestinians are rarely held accountable. From Palestine Minneapolis, the demands to abolish overfunded, hypermilitarized racial forces—from the army to the police—are flooding the streets.

According to B'Tselem, a human rights organization in occupied Palestine, in the last ten years Israeli occupation forces have killed more than 3,400 Palestinians. Only five have been convicted.²³ In the face of one of the strongest militaries in the world, Palestinians have had enough—from land theft to restriction of movement, home demolitions, torture and brutal force, settler violence, and the impediment annexation of larger and larger swathes of their land, Palestinians filling the streets in protest as I write. As I join protests for Floyd Chicago, I catch a glimpse of their signs on my computer screen that read "I can't breathe since 1948" covered in photos of Floyd and Hall. I came into MAMMAS haunted by the thought of Palestinian caretakers like Eyad's, holding up families and communities after state-sanctioned murder all the while empowered by the mothers and aunts who welcomed youth into political spaces and provided us with the hope and sense of community we needed to sustain our strength and our resistance.

Nadine Naber: Growing up in the Bay Area of California, on trips to my homeland, Jordan, a nation-state created out of the legacy British colonization, I met my father's cousins, whose mothers had led leftist feminist movements, who were active in the Arab Women Organization in Baga Palestinian Refugee Camp, and had integrated women-led humanitarian and charitable work into the Palestinian struggle for liberation.²⁴ From these and other elders, I learned that one of the very purposes of militarized Jordanian authoritarian rule was to sustain the interests of US empire in the Arab region and North Africa including the colonization of Palestine. I also learned that the labor mothers and caregivers was essential to the first Palestinian Intifada or uprising, beginning in 1987, not only as symbols of the nation but also on the front lines of resistance. At the time, I heard stories about mothers playing a central role in cooperatives, whereby the movement produced their own products while boycotting Israeli ones. Mothering forms of labor, such as baking goods or running schools and childcare

centers, contributed to growing the collective consciousness that was essential to the continuation of the Intifada.

In California, among my large extended immigrant family, I witnessed mothers and aunts holding the community together while striving to protect us from the struggles that Arab immigrant communities faced. These included anti-Arab racism, and the real and imagined surveillance of our community in service of Israeli colonization and, later, the war on terror. My mother and the aunts who raised me modeled what it means to define one's individual needs and desires through those of the collective. In my twenties, I became active in a leftist Arab movement focusing on Palestinian liberation and ending the war on Iraq in coalition with BIPOC movements of the 1990s. There, with members of a small feminist collective, I developed a shared consciousness about how women and gender nonconforming people were conducting the reproductive labor necessary to sustain our movement's work. Yet this labor was only valued when we enacted masculinist forms of activism—giving speeches, leading marches, and writing statements. In retrospect, we realized that while we formed feminist collectives to uplift all forms of movement labor, we did not do enough to sustain the participation of women whose possibilities for activism were quelled by the experience of becoming a mother.

And yet caring and care work, made manifest through accountability to our communities, was foundational to the success of our activism. In my thirties, I spent many years coworking on INCITE!'s anti-militarism campaign in coalition with women of color organizing against the prison-industrial complex.* My anti-militarist comrades and I knew that the US bombing of Afghanistan would not liberate but further harm Afghan women. Similarly, those of us fighting to end policing and prisons understood that the criminal justice system provides no justice for survivors of gender violence, only disempowers, and alienates them.²⁵ INCITE!'s insistence on community accountability as an alternative to calling the police inspired my realization of the power that lies within all oppressed people to resist and reimagine

the society we want to live in. This became clearer to me than before when the Ford Foundation denied a \$100,000 grant to INCITE! because of our anti-Zionist stance. Rather than compromising our identity with Palestinian liberation, we relied upon each other, built the resources our movement needed to thrive.

Yet my activism diminished after I entered the struggle collectively. I eventually gave birth to two children while managing pressures of state violence—from post-9/11 imperialist immigration bans impacting my life partner, an Egyptian immigrant and father of my children, to US-funded authoritarianism in Egypt that has increasingly and violently targeted many members of our community through torture, virginity testing, incarceration, and more efforts to quell the Egyptian revolution. In 2011 my partner returned to Egypt for the revolution he and his Egyptian comrades had been fighting for. While I became “the mother who stayed behind with the kids” while he went to fight on the front lines, my mothering never confined to domestic space. My politicized Arab identity necessitated politicized mothering. In one incident, I removed my African Arab toddler son from a daycare that blamed his typical toddler tendencies such as expressing frustration through biting or challenging disciplinary structures disproportionately targeting Black and Brown boys on our commitment to raise him bilingually. I also joined other mothers in a struggle to end celebrations of 9/11 “heroes” in schools that reinforce militarized patriotism and racism against Arab and Muslim schoolkids. All along, with feminist mothers from the Arab region and North Africa, we have been protecting our children from the violent Zionist attacks that consistently physically, verbally, and virtually target us for speaking out against Israeli settler colonialism.

Becoming a mother, I found myself increasingly disconnected from the women of color and Arab leftist spaces that I had for so long considered to be my home. Reflecting on my life in Egypt in the early 2000s I remembered how the children there were granted more attention and love within activist spaces and how family members and neighbors tended to share more childcare responsibilities. I started noticing how back then, even some of the most self-identified radical feminist of color

* Julia Chinyere Oparah, Alisa Bierria, Andrea J. Ritchie, Beth Richie, Shana M. Griffin, and Mimi Kim, among others.

organizing spaces excluded people who mother from a central seat at the table. As the Hosni Mubarak regime used gender violence like virginity testing and mother-shaming of protesters (for example, as “bad mothers” who deserve to be punished), I realized that activist mothering can powerfully disrupt heteropatriarchal concepts. Activist mothering upends the trope of “the respectable woman who stays home to care for the nation’s children”—a concept essential to sustaining militarized patriarchy. When the George Floyd protests broke out and Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot raised the bridges to lock protesters downtown to arrest them for breaking curfew, I remembered the counterprotest strategy Egyptian authoritarians used to quell the revolution. I also recalled the many stories of my comrades of all genders who relied upon reproductive forms of labor to sustain the Tahrir Square sit-in. Biological mothering was not the impetus for their involvement (for example becoming a mother of a martyr). Yet I was inspired to rethink who “counts” as an agent of revolution, what kinds of movement labor matter, and what spaces are necessary for sustaining a revolution. After the fall of Mubarak, when a violent counterrevolution crushed the aspirations of millions for an alternative future, one lesson became clear: If we are going to launch a revolution here in the US, we are going to need a plan for the kind of society we want after we win.

Our work with MAMAS was born out of these histories and our interest in reframing whose work our movements will value and the relations of not just protest but care needed to sustain the spirit of revolution for longer than we ever did before.

THE POWER OF MUTUAL AID AND IDENTIFICATION ON BEHALF OF THE COLLECTIVE

Here, we focus on the stories of approximately ten people. Most participate in MAMAS’s police and prisons working group and are caring for their sons who were physically or psychologically tortured by police into making false confessions. These individuals, Bertha, Denise, Rosemary, Regina, Armand, Escher, Kathy, and Frank include

biological mothers as well as fathers and friends and family members who participate in reproductive labor supporting police torturers. Most are Black and Latinx and two, who are responsible for mothering Matthew Echevarria, an incarcerated Puerto Rican man, are white. We also interviewed folks with incarcerated female members (Bella). All these individuals identify as survivors of and prison violence in their own right. We met these individuals while participating in activism related to prison abolition and police violence led by organizations like the Black Youth 100 Campaign to Free Incarcerated Survivors of Police Torture, the Chicago Torture Justice Center, and our work is indebted to long-standing movements against police torture in Chicago and nationally, feminist and queer abolitionist organizing.*

For decades, the courts in Illinois, particularly the Circuit Court of Cook County, routinely disbelieved and dismissed survivors’ claims of torture. Yet after decades of organizing, a powerful movement won reparations for police violence and continues to demand around police violence and prison abolition.²⁶ Now Chicago only city in the US with a Torture Inquiry and Relief Commission (TIRC), an administrative agency put in place to provide torturers with an avenue to have their claims heard in court. At the same time, the purpose of TIRC remains largely unfulfilled due to the lack of investment in the necessary financial resources and human capital to meet its mission and mandate. As a result, many torture survivors remain behind bars.²⁷

Through our work together in MAMAS, we learned how non-survivors of police violence in Chicago have been practicing collective care and mutual aid to survive and resist injustice for decades. With everyone in our working group identifies as an abolitionist (partially or fully) and we are committed to the disconnect between movement leadership and survivors)

* No list could ever capture this invaluable work over the years. We acknowledge all of the folks we have worked with and learned from, including but not limited to: Andrea J. Ritchie, Joey Mogul, Alice Kim, Monica C. Rachel Gaidor, Beth Richie, Deana Lewis, Maya Schenwar, Kelly Hayes, Sangi Ravichandran, Aishlinn Pulley, and organizations like Moms United Against Violence, Love and Protect, and many more.

stories and strategies align with abolitionist conversations about the significance of care work to the struggle to end the systems of policing and prisons. We believe the reproductive labor of mother-survivors can light the path forward.

Regina Russell, mother of torture-survivor Tamon Russell, says when she first met Armanda, mother of torture-survivor Gerald Reed, she turned to her union brother, Joe, and whispered to him, “She’s telling my story.” Like Gumbs, who says, “Our survival and our healing is linked to yours,”²⁸ Regina describes feeling helpless and suffering in silence until she connected with Armanda’s strength, which gave her permission to break her own silence and, for the first time, publicly share the story of what happened to her own son. Armanda says she is going to stay in the fight to release her son until the bitter end because there are so many others going through the same struggle.

While folks like Regina and Armanda call on their courage and use their voices to advocate and care for themselves, their children, the children of the other mothers, and all incarcerated people, they insist on the interconnectedness of care work and political organizing. This dual strategy has the effect of breaking down capitalist forms of isolation and individualism that take a disproportionate toll on their lives as they take on the state in a demand for justice.

Jenae Taylor, while working as the fellowship coordinator for the National Bailout Collective, talked with us about the power of connection between mothers impacted by incarceration:

For them to embrace each other and be like “Yo! What’s up?” and say “Hello” and introduce themselves because cages isolate us intentionally and for folks to have one experience [of] cages and be a part of the mass bailout and do a deep dive of political education to get answers to the questions they have answers to and to meet each other and anticipate the glow up it fulfilled at that moment—I will never forget. I think that is the coolest thing because we get to tear down isolation and be a part of fellowship together.

Connecting with each other provides nourishment and breaking the isolation that comes with living with the ripple effects of incarceration. Bella, founder of Sister Survivor Network and daughter to parents who

were incarcerated, tells us she learns collective ways of being from her mother’s incarceration: “What my mother and other folks she knows [who] have been incarcerated do is give themselves permission to see themselves in a different way, as valuable and not disposable. I want to follow in my mother’s footsteps. She has never left any of her friends behind. I have had my mother’s examples to show me that in real life and real time.”

Indeed, building such a collective sense of self constitutes a challenge to neoliberalism’s prioritization of the individual—and profit—over all else. Folks who work with MAMAS can model collective ways of being for each other and for anyone willing to look at incarceration through a critical lens. At the mercy of courts, and often excluded from access to adequate legal aid and information and excluded from professional networks connected to the criminal justice system, activists with MAMAS combine sharing knowledge as a practice of collective care and as political resistance.

Bertha Escamilla’s son, torture-survivor Nick Escamilla, was released in 2008, but Bertha continues to collect data on the cases of all Chicago’s torture survivors, including many who were tortured by cops whose violence is not yet publicly known and those who have yet to qualify for reparations. Mothers, loved ones, lawyers, researchers and activists have all relied on the data she shares—including information on ninety-two cases of police violence—to seek justice. She investigates police reports, locates information about each case, contacts family members by phone or meets them at the courthouse, and explains to them what to do and what to look for. Reflecting on the need for collective information sharing and relationship building, Bertha explains, “We are put into this situation where we don’t have any knowledge of what we’re supposed to do. We’re not educated to know about the law. We are factory workers or just driving a bus. We [mothers] encourage other mothers to look for things pertaining to their case so they know what to ask the lawyers. We do this with a lot of the families.” Forced to learn the law and figure it out collectively, Bertha and other activists with MAMAS replace a corporate, individualist system that depends on control over people and knowledge for the purposes

of exploitation with a horizontal system of knowledge sharing for the purposes of resistance. In community, they are caring for each other and those behind bars through both emotional support and fighting for justice on the premise that organizing, and care, are simultaneously revolutionary. Here, collective care work is a way of life, born out of the realities of mothering while being targeted by prisons and police. Bella remembers how her mother, who served years in prison, continued to write letters to her still-incarcerated friends and their children after she was released. “I see a whole lot of women in my family who take on those roles. It’s not really amplified in a way that a lot of other work is because it is not work for them. It is life.”

Caring for incarcerated people extends far beyond the individual and far beyond biology to include extended relatives, friends, and neighbors as central actors in collective mothering and caretaking. Armanda describes how her work against state violence will continue long after her son, Gerald, is released from prison:

I have had some people tell me when Gerald gets out your fight is over, but *no*, my fight is just beginning. Thinking about what I have been through and the people [who] were there to support me and thinking there are other men locked up in prison, some whose families are gone and, some of them, their mothers are no longer around. I talk to some of those young men out there in those facilities. Gerald puts me on the phone to talk to them because they have nobody else. That is what I am fighting for. He is not there by himself.

Esther Hernandez, whose sons are Juan and Rosendo, says she is fighting for everyone, not only her own child: “Every year in November we hold a potluck and fill out Christmas cards for all of them [people incarcerated with her sons]. The ones who are out tell me we are giving them hope. We are all here to fight for our loved ones. Together we have something to offer. All around Chicago, there is corruption with the police, and we want to let people know it is going on.”

Indeed, folks connected to MAMAS care for many individuals to whom they are not biologically related. Kathy Wanek Levettman’s best friend’s son, Matthew Echevarria, is an incarcerated torture survivor. As Kathy puts it, “The thing is, I love him too now. I have my own

personal relationship with him, that’s why I don’t drop out.” Like Bertha regularly visits and speaks to prisoners on the phone over a decade after her biological son’s release: “I am involved with anyone who has loved ones incarcerated.”

They work tirelessly not only to support those they love but to send a message to the criminal justice system and to society broadly. They reject narrowly conceived definitions of family and collective responsibility for each other’s children, caring and demanding justice all at once. When they show up in the courtroom for other, they are deliberate about the message it sends, as Esther explains:

The judges look at that. When judges see an empty courtroom, could harm your case. I always tell people, “Let’s go.” Our community was a target by the corrupted cops, so our thing is to bring awareness. We like to support whenever there is a court hearing for the guys. We do rallies in front of the courthouse, and we want to expose these detectives for the corruption they have done. We want to bring our loved ones home and to expose these detectives for the corruption they have done. There are many of them.

This collective care work thus serves very practical purposes such as sharing of information and resources, but it also has symbolic purposes. Being present to witness and support each other’s struggles disrupts the 1950s heteropatriarchal-capitalist ideal of the “nuclear family”—a family that rejects the negative stigmatization of those who are incarcerated as well as those who love them. Caring for one another unleashes collective organizing power—whether it is by mobilizing people to show up in court or raising the political consciousness of people unaware of their racist and corrupt police and prison systems.

MAMAS LEADING THE WAY FORWARD

Nationalist, colonialist, and capitalist forces seek to devalue and exploit individuals, families, and communities; people who mother long been targets of these systems because the caring work they stand as obstacles to this process. In Chicago, mother-survivors and a fierce determination to collectively challenge repressive systems

corporate vultures who profit from incarceration. They nurture one another, declare their love for each other, and seek not only to bring their own children home but also to expose and protest the inhumanity of the entire prison system. As they integrate care and collective unity with resistance, they are a force to be reckoned with. While they stand on the front lines of the fight for future generations, social movements of all types would do well to let them lead by example.

Left-leaning social movement rhetoric often insists that “we are not a direct service organization,” as if to imply that providing services and support is somehow disconnected from the loftier political goals of justice and liberation. Collective practices of mothering show that dismantling harmful structures like the prison-industrial complex must be an ongoing collective endeavor that recognizes the power and well-being of all sectors of our communities as essential resources. They show that mothering labor is movement work that must be nourished, uplifted, and contended with.

If the aim of abolition is to build another, better society and if the current surge of support for Black Lives Matter and for defunding and abolishing police make the violent injustices of capitalist control ever more visible, then we need a renewed commitment to horizontal politics, collective labor, and to recognizing the often invisible and highly gendered forms of work that enable social movements to survive and thrive.

The ultimate outcome of this current pandemic and today’s mass uprisings remains unknown. One thing we have learned again and again, from contexts like #NODAPL, Tahrir Square, and far beyond, is that protests against militarized state violence require care work if the movement—or the revolution—is going to survive. Today, masses of protesters wear masks and use distance when possible, and care for one another in an unprecedented situation of protesting during a pandemic, enacting the many ways of fighting for life while protecting life.

This time, we need to insist that no one takes for granted any longer the care work that has always been exceptionally urgent to our movements. Whether faced with extraordinary events such as natural disasters, political revolutions, virulent new diseases, or the mundane operations of violent institutions, the movement strategies of those

who mother—centered on the integration of care work and organizing—constitute some of the most urgently collective being in the world. Indeed, the labor of mothering in the face of violence is an inherently radical act.*

NOTES

1 Naomi Klein, “Movement Building in the Time of the Coronavirus: A Left Feminist Perspective on 21st Century Racial Capitalism in The Moment, with Rising Majority and Angela Y. Davis,” recorded April https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=100119115694252&ref=tch_permalink.

2 See Leyla Savloff, “Deviant Motherhood: House Arrest and Social Being in Argentina,” *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (March 2020), 67–88. Savloff’s story of an Argentinian arts-based collective for formerly and currently incarcerated women offers one recent example of the ways in which mothers impacted incarceration mobilize radical forms of collective care as resistance to violence. For additional work on radical care that resists neoliberal co-optation, see the fall “Radical Care” issue of *Social Text* in which Savloff’s article appears.

3 See Silvia Federici, “Social Reproduction Theory: History, Issues, and Present Challenges,” *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (Spring 2019), <https://radicalphilosophy.com/article/social-reproduction-theory-2>.

4 “People’s Strike and the Uprising: An Open Letter to All Forces Fighting Our Lives,” People’s Strike, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://peoplesstrike.org/peoples-strike-and-the-uprising-an-open-letter/>.

5 Here, we draw upon Nadine Naber’s “Liberate Your Research” workshops. Nadine Naber, “Liberated Workshops,” accessed September 9, 2020, <http://naberenaber.com/liberate-your-research/>.

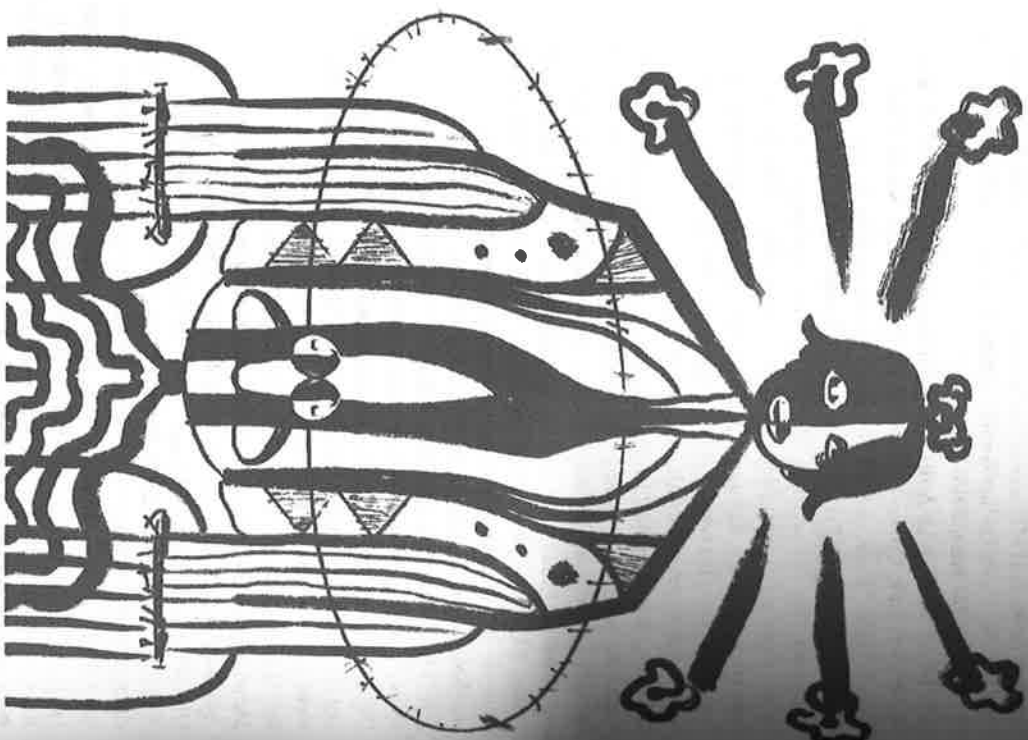
6 For further feminist critiques of the academic-industrial complex, see E. Cotera, “Women of Color, Tenure, and the Neoliberal University,” *Academic Repression: Reflections from the Academic Industrial Complex*, eds. Anthony J. Nocella II, Steven Best, and Peter McLaren (Chico, CA: AR 2010), 328–36; Gabriela Gutiérrez y Muus et al., eds., *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Boulder, CO:

* We work from a number of important assumptions: That people who mother incarcerated individuals are survivors of gender violence, specific reproductive injustice, given that the state violently denies them the ability to care for and protect their children; the criminal justice system blatantly covers up state violence by calling their mothering into question, assuming that unfit parenting is to blame for their child’s “criminality”; that the purpose of the criminal justice system is to serve and protect white supremacy and racial capitalism; and we have to care for ourselves and each other on a long road to justice.

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all incarceration

is family separation



Mon M, "All Incarceration Is Family Separation"

TEACHING ABOLITIONIST PRACTIS IN THE EVERYDAY

Qui Alexander

When I was twenty-four, I was invited to be a part of a transformative justice collective in my West Philadelphia neighborhood. At the time, I had no idea what transformative justice was or what a collective of folks "doing" transformative justice actually looked like. I learned that I was being invited to join a group of folks trying to figure out how to respond to sexual violence in our local community. Specifically, they worked with people who caused harm, to hold them accountable and help them change their behaviors.

I had so many questions. So, you work with people who hurt people? Why not just call the police? There was a part of me that knew why they didn't call the police. The same part of me that froze when I questioned if I should call the police while I watched domestic violence happen in my home. The part of me that understood that the police wouldn't make this situation better—they would only bring chaos to my family. I knew deep down the police were not safe, but I didn't know there was something we could do about it, or that the police could be the target of a community-centered critique. Through the community organizers, I began to learn about prison abolition, non-punitive community accountability, and strategies for responding to harm and violence without causing more harm and violence.

This collective, Philly Stands Up, invited me to study¹ with other queer folks who were working to embody an abolitionist praxis. That praxis is what Dylan Rodríguez refers to as a "fundamental critical