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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The new issue of *S&F Online* brings together timely contributions within the emergent intersection of abolition feminism and social reproduction at a moment when carcerality continues to proliferate under new guises. This framework makes visible the carceral state's imbrication in the maintenance of everyday life while insisting on the long genealogy of feminist struggles that have always understood abolition as a reproductive question. Guest editors Sarah Haley and Emily Thuma gather these contributions to examine how gendered, racialized, and classed forms of life are both sustained and constrained by carceral systems, and how abolitionist praxis reimagines and rebuilds the reproduction of the social otherwise. Abolition feminism here operates as analytic and an ethic: a refusal of state violence with a commitment to building alternative infrastructures of care, safety, and survival.

From historical and ethnographic analyses to conversations among both incarcerated and non-incarcerated organizers, writers, and scholars, the pieces invoke long histories of collective resistance. Themes include policing, mass incarceration (and "benevolent" decarceration), genocidal violence, and reproductive injustice as well as forms of resistance in family- and kinship-making, self-defense, and collective survival. Some pieces foreground real-time theorizing, analysis, and denunciation (Abusneineh; Burton, Haley, King, Schept, and Stockton; Wilson; and Harris). Others take a more extended view, offering longer-term analyses through case studies or reflections on sustained collective organizing projects (Bierria, Matthiesen, Martensen). Placed in conversation, these works amplify one another: the immediacy of lived struggle deepens the insights of historical and ethnographic work, while longer perspectives sharpen our understanding and analysis of the present moment.

This issue vibrates with the ever-present tension between the need (and demand) for visibility and the risks of surveillance. To be seen is a precursor to being recognized, to being counted as a member of a community, of society, indeed, even as human. On the flipside, carceral institutions and power structures violently demand full visibility: at the most visceral level, "the count" is a daily ritual to which incarcerated people must submit. At the narrative level, the testimonies crafted and circulated by incarcerated people are powerful resistance against the isolation and disappearances that are enacted by imprisonment — even as those same testimonies are circumscribed by state surveillance. The contributions to this issue model forms of collaboration, solidarity, and imagination necessary to sustain abolitionist feminist thought and practice across and against the contradictions of the reproduction of carcerality.

The issue builds on a twenty-year history of *S&F Online* and BCRW on prison-industrial complex abolition feminism. Our 2007 issue, "Women, Prisons and Change," building on the 2006 Scholar and Feminist Conference, "Engendering Justice: Prisons, Activism and Change," traced the history of mass incarceration and its relation to immigration, education, and gender violence. BCRW has continued to produce projects centered around this work, such as the series No One Is Disposable and I Use My Love to Guide Me with Cece McDonald, Tourmaline, and Dean Spade in 2014; the Interrupting Criminalization: Research in Action initiative alongside Andrea J. Ritchie and Mariame Kaba in 2018; or the symposium of the same year, "Invisible No More: Resisting Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color in Troubled Times," which became a special issue in 2019 titled, "Unraveling Criminalizing Webs: Building Police Free Futures," guest edited by Ritchie and Levi Craske. "Abolition Feminism and the Politics of Reproduction" carries forward our commitment to feminist prison abolition research and action.

To build solidarity across walls and with incarcerated readers, this issue has also been designed for print — a first in the history of *S&F Online*. If you would like a free copy of the issue to be sent to an incarcerated friend or loved one through Haymarket's Books Not Bars program, please visit tinyurl.com/SFO-in-print. The print version was beautifully crafted by Mitch Wiesen, and Dana Blanchard has generously coordinated distribution through Haymarket. We owe deep appreciation to the guest editors for centering this accessibility effort from the very beginning of the issue's conceptualization, and we extend particular recognition to Emily Thuma, who managed the print production and distribution process. The move toward print also builds on BCRW's ongoing commitment to accessibility and collective knowledge production, and reflects our desire to think expansively about how feminist publishing can circulate beyond academic and digital spaces in this moment.

We are deeply grateful to the guest editors for their visionary curatorial and editorial work, and to all the contributors who took part in the intellectual milestone that this special issue embodies. The BCRW editorial team has also worked relentlessly to publish the most compelling and rigorous version of the issue. Special thanks to Sarah Ross, our associate editor, and Kelsey Kitzke, Ruben Carter, and Lea Salim for their work on the contributions.

Sandra Moyano-Ariza
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Guest Editors' Introduction

SARAH HALEY AND EMILY THUMA

> At its core, abolition feminism is the practice of making a world where all life is meaningful, where needs are met and the means to thrive are secure. Abolition is "about building life-affirming institutions," as Ruth Wilson Gilmore is often quoted as saying.[1] For example, the national grassroots organization Critical Resistance centers its vision of abolition on "the creation of genuinely healthy, stable communities that respond to harm without relying on imprisonment and punishment."[2] Or, as scholar-activists Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober write, "abolition feminisms represent a long arc of ethical life-making and everyday practice that has always been at the root of abolitionist possibility."[3]
>
> Abolitionist feminist scholarship and activism has expansively charted how meaningful collective life is imagined, produced, and sustained while mapping the terrains of life in which carceral dispossession is reproduced, including and especially terrains that are "hidden, disguised, or devalued,"[4] and where subjection masquerades as recognition and care.[5] As an analytic and a praxis, abolition feminism helps us develop a sharper analysis of both carceral power and anticarceral possibility, bringing us closer to what a life-affirming society might look and feel like. For instance, abolition feminists have long challenged the liberal feminist reform movement for "kinder, gentler, gender-responsive" prisons for women as a quintessential example of prison expansion adorned in the language of prison reform.[6] Abolition feminists have also offered incisive critiques of the ways in which carceral logics proliferate within "institutions that are allegedly organized to provide assistance," from shelters to welfare offices.[7] Carceral institutions, no matter their form or the harm they purport to address, steal life instead of promoting its flourishing. The photograph on the cover of this special issue, of a 1966 protest organized by the Boston-based group Mothers for Adequate Welfare, represents one moment in the long arc of feminist struggle against the carceral capture of life sustainment.
>
> In this special issue on abolition feminism we seek to highlight scholarship and organizing that explores the intersection of carcerality, reproduction, and anticarceral life-making. Ranging from long and short-form essays to interview and roundtable conversations, the contributions examine the workings of carceral power and modes of abolitionist struggle through the prism of social reproduction, traversing an array of historical and contemporary sites and practices. The term social reproduction is engaged expansively here to refer to the work of sustaining human life within and across generations, and to include its entanglements with biological reproduction. Feminist theorists of social reproduction have charted its distinct role in the production of capital and commodities.[8] According to Tithi Bhattacharya, social reproduction theory is a framework "that is not content to accept what seems like a visible, finished entity — in this case, our worker at the gates of her workplace — but interrogates the complex network of social processes and human relations that produces the conditions of existence for that entity."[9] As the National Domestic Workers Alliance pithily summarizes, "domestic work makes all other work possible."[10] In situating social production in colonial and imperial contexts, Aren Aizura writes that "societies have instrumentalized reproduction in both social and biological forms to concretize racial, gender, and sexual orders."[11] Core to the conception of and thinking in this special issue is the imprint of theorists of racial capitalism, especially Black feminist theorists of captivity, the domestic, and reproduction.[12]

Building on these genealogies of thought and praxis, this issue asks what the analytic of social reproduction brings to feminist carceral studies and abolition. Across the contributions, readers will find incisive analyses of socially reproductive labor within and against the prison, the multiple dimensions of reproductive violence that constitute mass incarceration and genocide, the carceral state's instrumentalization of institutions of social reproduction in marginalized communities, and insurgent practices of care work, kin-making, and collective defense.

The issue opens with a roundtable conversation between Sarah Haley, Orisanmi Burton, Tiffany Lethabo King, Judah Schept, and Rosie Stockton in which they collectively theorize carceral social reproduction as the extraction and manipulation of life sustainment into carceral state resource. The dominant form of prison labor today is not the work of producing commodities for sale, but rather the work of maintaining and securing bodies in captivity, whether by guards who leave the institution at night or by the people who are forced to stay.[13] Yet the utterly essential character of socially reproductive labor is often elided in conversations about carceral economies. Together the scholar-activists in this conversation contend with the carceral state's "punitive management of injured life perpetually on the verge of death," as Haley writes in her roundtable introduction. While Burton conceives of social reproduction in the prison context "as a technique of low intensity warfare," Schept turns to the social reproduction of the guards engaged in this warfare and to the prison's surrounding communities "that the carceral state mobilizes into constitutive components for its own reproduction." Stockton shifts our attention to the putative private sphere, exploring "how the state has criminalized, controlled, and exploited the gendered labor/practices that reproduce 'surplus populations' in the form of extreme sentencing." King brings our focus to the historical context of the plantation and the ways in which "Black people's life-affirming and life-ending activities" were at once "sustaining, disrupting, and destroying the processes of social reproduction" on which the carceral order depended. Taken together, participants reflect on a range of rebellious activities within and against carceral institutions and consider how they manifest abolitionist possibility.

The question of social reproduction inside and against the prison is also explored by Sara Matthiesen, Stevie Wilson, and Kwaneta Harris. These authors diagram mass incarceration as a project of reproductive control, in both biological and social terms. They chart the prison's generalized assault on reproductive possibility through family and kinship separation, specific technologies of reproductive violence and neglect, and the policing of gender and sexuality. Yet, they also detail various informal and formal strategies engaged behind and across prison walls to fight these assaults on bodily autonomy, biological and chosen family-making, and the estrangement that prisons produce between parents and children.

Sara Matthiesen's essay brings us to the first decade of the late-twentieth century US prison buildup and explores incarcerated women's labor to make and sustain families across the prison wall in the face of state neglect. Focusing on California's state and federal prisons, Matthiesen illuminates numerous examples of what she refers to as "experiments in making life on the inside," reading them as "moments of abolition." For instance, a mass uprising at the California Institution for Women in 1975 was catalyzed by prison authorities' decision to close the annual holiday party to loved ones on the outside. In tracing political activity that ranged from the "Christmas riot" to lawfare to the building of a children's center, Matthiesen explores how the energy, effort, emotions, and skill of those held inside prison are at once extracted for the sustainment of the carceral state *and* are expropriated by imprisoned people toward their own well-being, relation, and extrication.

In a wide-ranging interview with Emily Thuma, imprisoned organizer and writer Stevie Wilson delves into questions of reproductive labor and care in the movement for prison-industrial complex abolition. Wilson traces the throughlines from his experiences in HIV/AIDS activism and Philadelphia's ballroom community to his abolitionist organizing behind and across prison walls — from infrastructures of mutual aid to political education to noncarceral responses to harm — charting the development of his Black anarchist orientation toward the state. Toggling between the violence of racialized heteropatriarchal policing and organized abandonment in the city and the techniques of control and repression in the prison, Wilson illuminates how "kinship making is the antidote" to carceral state violence and collective care is the fabric of abolitionist struggle.

In her essay, imprisoned journalist and reproductive justice advocate Kwaneta Harris wrenchingly reveals a "calculated system" of reproductive power and control operating in Texas's women's

prisons today, one buttressed by the state's reproductive healthcare deserts, anti-LGBTQ policies, and family policing system. In a political economy of sexual coercion and violence, prison guards weaponize imprisoned people's access to their children, parole hearing dates, faith-based programs, and even menstrual supplies. As Harris shows, continuities of control are readily found in other state prison systems as well as in systems of parole and probation where "the methods might differ, but the goal remains the same." Yet continuities of resistance also abound, as Harris and her neighbors practice refusal and collectively organize for bodily autonomy in myriad inventive ways.

From carceral reproductive terror in US prisons to the "open-air prison" of Gaza, the essays by Harris and Bayan Abusneineh variously expose the multiplicity and centrality of reproductive violence in the consolidation and social reproduction of carceral states. Abusneineh's essay brings together analyses of the carcerality of the longstanding Israeli occupation of Palestine and the reproductive genocide still under way in Gaza at the time of this writing. Building on the Palestinian Feminist Collective's "Statement on Reproductive Genocide in Gaza," Abusneineh examines the carceral dimensions of three kinds of genocidal violence against the biological and social reproduction of Palestinian life: obstetric violence; infrastructural violence, and the deliberate killing of children. Reproductive genocide and carcerality are "mutually reinforcing mechanisms of elimination, where the regulation of birth, life, and kinship is inseparable from the prison-like conditions imposed on an entire population," she writes. Ultimately, Abusneineh argues that Gaza "must be understood as a critical site for grasping the inseparability of struggles for reproductive justice and carceral abolition."

Both Abusneineh and Alisa Bierria contend with the question of life-making in places where life is relentlessly under assault. Bierria's context is the "criminalizing pipeline" that captures survivors of domestic and/or sexual violence who defend themselves from life-threatening abuse. Her essay proposes a survivor-centered liberatory paradigm of self-defense emerging from this experience of subjection to both interpersonal and state violence. To develop this paradigm, Bierria draws on the community-based participatory research conducted for a 2022 report she co-authored for the national feminist abolitionist organization Survived & Punished entitled, *Defending Self-Defense: A Call to Action*. Here, she synthesizes survivor participants' individual and collective insights with academic research to demonstrate the "inconceivability of self-defense" before the law for Black, Native, immigrant, and trans survivors, and to distill a praxis of survivor self-defense that interrogates and resists the law's violence. Through the prism of those outlawed for surviving gendered violence, Bierria argues for an expansive understanding of self-defense as an "ongoing practice of survival . . . stretched across time," and as a practice of collective freedom-making.

As noted at the outset of this introduction, abolition feminism has been a crucial analytic for excavating the insidious ways in which carcerality is reproduced through purportedly progressive reforms. Kayla Martensen's essay critically analyzes the proliferation of alternatives to incarceration programs for youth in recent decades. Drawing on a mixed-methods study of Cook County, Illinois, she provides a case study analysis of how institutions of social reproduction in racially and economically marginalized communities have become increasingly vulnerable to carceral cooptation. Under the auspices of benevolent reformism, youth decarceration has been spliced with what Martensen calls a "carceral service industry," wherein nonprofit service providers assume the responsibilities of surveilling and controlling court-involved young people. Martensen Ultimately urges those invested in systemic change to stay analytically vigilant toward the hydra of carcerality and its ability to reproduce itself through reform.

Like many contributors to this special issue, Martensen reminds us to keep our collective eye on an abolitionist horizon. Readers of these brilliant contributions will find that they also engage the crucial question of the social reproduction of life-affirming movements. Taken together, they name the work of "caring collectively" behind and across prison walls as vital political labor.[14] They amplify the significance of insurgent knowledge production across generations. They point us toward numerous groups and organizations, across time and geography, that remind us that relationship-building and collective defense are at the heart of sustained struggles for radical freedom.

Given the prohibition of internet access in US prisons, we have ensured that this particular issue of *The Scholar and Feminist Online* has also been designed for print in an effort to facilitate intellectual exchange across prison walls. Each contribution to the issue is available for downloading as a printable, foldable booklet, and

bound copies of the full issue are available for free to incarcerated people through Haymarket Books's Books Not Bars program.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to all of the contributors of this special issue for entrusting us with their writings. All our thanks as well to the reviewers, and to the artists who granted us permission to publish their work. Without the tenacious efforts of Sandra Moyano-Ariza and Beck Jordan-Young at *S&F Online*, this issue would not have been possible; many thanks as well to creative director Hope Dector. We greatly appreciate Mitch Wiesen for designing the issue for print. Tremendous thanks to Dana Blanchard at Haymarket Books for generously collaborating with us to print and distribute the issue across the prison wall. A special thanks as well to Alisa Bierria and Grace Kyungwon Hong for their invaluable support and feedback, and to Premilla Nadasen for her vision and for creating the opportunity for these ideas to come together.

SARAH HALEY is the author of *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, published in 2016.

EMILY THUMA is an associate professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington Tacoma where she teaches in the programs in politics, law, and gender and sexuality studies. She is the author of *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (Haymarket Books).

NOTES

1. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Keynote conversation, Making and Unmaking Mass Incarceration conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, December 5, 2019.
2. Critical Resistance, "Mission & Vision," 2025, https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/.
3. Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober, "Introduction: Abolition Feminisms in Transformative Times," in *Abolition Feminisms, Volume 1: Organizing, Survival, and Transformative Practice*, ed. Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober (Haymarket Books, 2022), 3.
4. Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober, "Introduction: Making a Clearing," in *Abolition Feminisms, Volume 2: Organizing, Survival, and Transformative Practice*, ed. Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober (Haymarket Books, 2022), 1.
5. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997).
6. Rose Braz, "Kinder, Gentler, Gender Responsive Cages: Prison Expansion Is Not Prison Reform," *Women, Girls, and Criminal Justice 7*, no. 6 (2006): 87–88.
7. Beth E. Richie, "Carcerality," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. The Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (NYU Press, 2021), 41.
8. Premilla Nadasen argues that classical social reproduction theory sees social reproduction as a "precondition for capitalist profit" rather than "the creation of profit itself," reflecting a "presumed distinction between social reproduction and production." Analysts of racial capitalism, however, explain the inseparability of production and reproduction in the history of slavery and the direct commodification of reproductive work in the increasing predominance of medical, affective, immaterial, and service-based economies. Premilla Nadasen, *Care: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Haymarket Books, 2023), 8-9. We are indebted to Nadasen's work on the carceral construction of welfare, which partially inspired our choice of cover image for this issue.
9. Tithi Bhattacharya, "Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (Pluto Press, 2017), 2.
10. National Domestic Workers Alliance, "About Domestic Work," www.domesticworkers.org/about-domestic-work/.
11. Aren Aizura, "Reproduction," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. The Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (NYU Press, 2021), 188.
12. See, for example, Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Saidiya Hartman, "Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18.1 (2016); Sara Clarke Kaplan, *The Black Reproductive: Unfree Labor and Insurgent Motherhood* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Pantheon Books, 1997); Jennifer Morgan and Alys Weinbaum, ed. "Reproductive Racial Capitalism," *History of the Present* 14, no. 1(2024); and Premilla Nadasen, *Care*.
13. Ruth Wilson Gilmore and James Kilgore, "Some Reflections on Prison Labor," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2019, https://brooklynrail.org/2019/06/field-notes/Some-Reflections-on-Prison-Labor/.
14. While a commonly used phrase, in the context of this discussion we acknowledge the tenacious work of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, for whom it is an official motto and north star. Other abolition feminist organizations doing invaluable intellectual and organizing work at the nexus of abolition, care, and reproduction include Survived and Punished, the Bloom Collective, Interrupting Criminalization, Southerners on New Ground, Black Mama's Bailout, The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls, and Women with a Vision.

Social Reproduction and Abolition: A Roundtable

ORISANMI BURTON, SARAH HALEY,
TIFFANY LETHABO KING, JUDAH SCHEPT,
AND ROSIE STOCKTON

In July 2024, special issue editors Sarah Haley and Emily Thuma asked Orisanmi Burton, Tiffany Lethabo King, Judah Schept, and Rosie Stockton — visionary scholars of captivity, carcerality, rebellion, and gender theory — to engage the following questions: 1) How does the analytic of social reproduction contribute to your prison-industrial complex abolitionist work (whether in scholarly, organizing, and/or creative realms)? 2) What genealogies of thought and praxis inform your understanding of the relationship between the carceral state and social reproduction? Relatedly: how does thinking social reproduction, carceral power, and abolition together provide more gender nuance in analyses of abolition and/or elucidate any racial conundrums in analyses of social reproduction?

These questions were meant to provoke a reckoning withthe multiple implications of tethering the crises of the carceral to that of social reproduction. Carceral social reproduction names a dire conundrum: life is a necessary constitutive element of the carceral project, even as it is brutalized and enervated life; even as it is immured and reviled. The false promise of prison as livelihood and life-protecting exists, of course, alongside carceral social negation — social and physical death-making — which is a perpetual feature of imprisonment and carceral control.

Carceral social reproduction is neither an established field of study nor elaborated theory; in fact, the term has rarely been used by scholars. And while we see the productive potential of thinking about the way that life is made and unmade via carceral regimes, practices, agents, and institutions toward the project of abolition, we seek to grapple with a set of questions about social reproduction rather than to commodify a set of ideas or produce a unified definition of the term. As a starting ground, this roundtable explores a set of inquiries, histories, experiences, and structural shifts. For example, how do we think about the significance of the life work that takes place inside institutions of captivity? How might we struggle against a regime that insists that prisons promote human sustainability? How do we produce a fully-loaded cost accounting of how meaningful, dignified, experimental, and creative life is precluded by policing and carceral regimes, to say nothing of the prison state's unraveling of the capacity to meet basic human needs?

There continues to be an urgent need to face the state's selective deployment of carceral expansion as life sustainment and its enduring proliferation of the notion that Black and Brown bodies reproduce criminality. Scholars have exposed how carceral and legal regimes structurally thwart the life chances of those populations rendered socially excess, economically surplus, or in other ways disposable. They have traced imprisoned peoples' insurgent practices of living, struggles toward life-making, forging of — and foraging for — intimate relation, ingenious practical inventions, and revolutionary organizing, all vital topics that might be further explored through an analysis of carceral social reproduction.

As feminist scholar Premilla Nadasen explains, the scholarship of social reproduction theory "argues that capital or the state [has] supported this [care and household] labor because women's labor of cooking, cleaning, and caring created the capacity for labor-power

needed by capital to generate profit through commodity production."[1] Carceral social reproduction thus follows Nadasen's work and that of Black and Marxist feminist writers and activists to expand thinking about social reproduction beyond the activity that produces a (typically) male worker producing exchange value. Instead, carceral social reproduction reckons with carceral capitalism in relation to and in excess of commodity production, and delineates the state's punitive management of injured life perpetually on the verge of death. That is, the reproduction of life for the carceral state's own proliferation exists alongside carceral enervation and annihilation.

Police often extract people from the home, a key realm of social reproduction, to legitimate and sustain the cellblock; in so doing, they and other carceral agents render imprisoned people and their broad relatives vulnerable to premature death. The home is also the site of violently coerced care work. The carceral regime facilitates, intensifies, and replicates such gendered and sexual abuse. Nadasen urges an analysis of social reproduction grounded in the economic value of care itself under racial capitalism. Theory and activism around carceral social reproduction must, along the same lines, grapple with life and its value, production, constraint, restraint, and obliteration. All this in the historical context of the afterlives of slavery, toward the fortification of national borders and nationalist constituencies, in service of unregulated capital accumulation, and through an infrastructure of forced gender normativity.

As I have written elsewhere, the "daily activity of force required to compel the labor of basic human needs provision is also part of the work of carceral social reproduction."[2] In carceral institutions, incarcerated people who attend to the basic needs of the captive population (food preparation, laundry, janitorial tasks), and those who manage, compel, and extract that labor through their position of "guarding," are all performing socially reproductive labor amidst abounding violence.[3] Such socially reproductive "violence work" extends the logics and economic imperatives of slavery, in which the captive Black body was put to use against itself, for the purpose of materially reproducing the slaveholding economy.[4] We gingerly propose that the current regime, too, relies upon a system of "carceral increase."[5]

Judah Schept, a contributor to this roundtable, has discussed social reproduction as a "process of community renovation through prison and jail growth."[6] Policies that purport to create community growth and economic redevelopment through the expansion of prisons gesture to the salience of what Dylan Rodriguez calls the prison regime, a "putative 'centering' and consolidation of power that, in practice, *necessarily exceeds and violates its official directives and juridical norms*."[7] In emphasizing dominion over domicile it becomes clear that the prison is a place, but it is emplaced through its command over living and dying itself.

In the responses that follow, the roundtable participants offer still more ways of thinking about the category of carceral social reproduction. They are meant to be read alongside the video clips of a conversation that took place after all of the contributors had read each other's essays. Taken together, they urge us to consider carceral social reproduction as a mode of warfare. They elaborate the negotiation and negation of captive reproduction under the long historical domain of the settlement-plantation; they elucidate the production of criminalized existence as carceral material; they excavate the life infrastructures of carceral maintenance and unpack the political project of carceral social revitalization.

— Sarah Haley

SARAH HALEY: How does the analytic of social reproduction contribute to your prison-industrial complex abolitionist work (whether in scholarly, organizing, and/or creative realms)?

ORISANMI BURTON: Social reproduction asks us to consider how social subjects, social relations, institutions, and systems of power are made, remade, and unmade at different scales and across generations. I think about social reproduction in the context of the prison as a technique of low intensity warfare. Focusing on the late 1960s and the early 1970s — the pivot point of the US prison system's globally and historically unprecedented expansion — I focus on how prisons are deployed to contain and neutralize populations rendered surplus by capital as well as potential and extant political militants.

This institutionalized domestic war unfolds on different terrains, perhaps most effectively on the terrain of narrative, memory,

and ideology. It is a future-oriented war, which is to say that this counterinsurgency is not only interested in eliminating radicalism in the here and now but also its prospect. Three examples from the state archive should sufficiently prove this assertion. Point five of the FBI's anti-Black Counterintelligence Program — which employed political imprisonment, assassination, defamation and other nefarious tactics to destroy progressive and radical left movements — prioritized preventing radical ideas from reaching youth.[8] Similarly, in a memo from 1968, the Special Agent in Charge of the FBI field office in San Francisco wrote to Director J. Edgar Hoover that "the negro youth and moderate must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teaching, they will be dead revolutionaries."[9] Furthermore, a 2021 manual outlines what the US military calls the "generational approach" to counterinsurgency, in which young people must be treated as the primary targets for psychological operations designed to shore up their identification with the state.[10]

These examples demonstrate that state actors are thinking about social reproduction, and specifically about how to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of Black radical knowledge, knowledge that threatens the stability of the carceral system and the broader social order. With this framework in mind, my research examines the modalities through which imprisoned Black men rebel within and against this counterinsurgency. This rebellion often expresses itself in classically militant forms of both armed and unarmed rebellion, but it also expresses itself in ways that are often disqualified from the realm of the political, through intimacy and what I have termed "Black masculine care work."[11] I have looked at how imprisoned Black men establish durable networks of inter and intra-generational kinship through which they collectively nurture their humanity, creativity, and development amid the suffocating atmosphere of captivity. They feed each other, teach each other, sing to each other, tell each other stories, and protect each other from harm. These intimate networks of care and accountability become critical sites of anti-carceral struggle. They can function as autonomous infrastructures of Black radical consciousness. They can also be captured and coopted by state programs that reform them into technologies for maintaining institutional stability.

TIFFANY LETHABO KING: Throughout my work, I have paid attention to the ways that Black people's life-affirming and life-ending activities can sustain or ruin the carceral order of the "settlement-plantation."[12] The settlement-plantation is a material, ideological, discursive, aesthetic, epistemic, and metaphysical space of conquest. I have spent considerable time attending to the ways that the violently regulated space of the Black maternal holds the potential to reproduce or destroy the settlement-plantation and its afterlives. As the 50-year anniversary of the Moynihan Report approached, I returned to the work of the radical Black organizer, Pacifica radio host, and artist Kay Lindsey. Her 1970 essay "The Black Woman as a Woman," which appears in the anthology *The Black Woman* edited by Toni Cade Bambara, puts forth an unusual Black feminist demand: "the abolition of the family."[13] Lindsey's essay, rooted in Black feminist and Marxist feminist analyses, theorized the family as an arm of the capitalist state. As a space that reproduced the violence of the state, the family functioned as a key site of social reproduction and thus a target for destruction. In the words of Lindsey, "The family has been used by the white agency to perpetuate the state, and Blacks have been used as extensions of the white family, as the prisoners of war enslaved to do the dirty work of the family, i.e. the state. If the family as an institution were destroyed, the state would be destroyed."[14]

Lately, I find myself returning to archives that surface Black enslaved and Black captive communities on plantations who were sustaining, disrupting, and destroying the processes of social reproduction that sustained relations of conquest and domination. My more recent scholarly endeavors have turned my attention to archival accounts of the panic that dirt eating (or Cachexia Africana) caused in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for slave owners in the Caribbean and US South.[15] The translation of Cachexia Africana is "literally the African wasting disease."[16] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Black practices like dirt-eating perplexed and stoked the anxieties of the planter class, as well as the physicians that plantation owners employed to help maintain their slave populations. In 1799, physicians like Colin Chisholm diagnosed Cachexia Africana (and to a lesser extent Mal d'Estomac) as a disease that affected Africans in the Americas exclusively.[17] Due to its potentially devastating impact on plantation (re)productivity, the disease and its carriers became critical sites of observation and medical intervention on plantations. Physicians like Chisholm, who treated the enslaved, and John Imray, who treated "apprenticed

laborers" held captive on plantation estates in Dominica between 1835 and 1841 evince slave owners and plantation managers' desperate attempts to treat their captive Black laborers who failed to be productive and reproductive.[18] In addition to Cachexia Africana rendering the enslaved incapable of labor for varied periods of time, for enslaved women, reproductive functions were also interrupted. According to Imray's case notes, women experienced "obstruction or suppression of the menstrual discharge."[19] In my article, "Geophagia: The Pull of the Earth," I posit dirt eating as a Black "maternal function" that fails to reproduce the existing order.[20] Dirt eaters' maternal function or (anti)work breaks with slavery's plantation orders as well as "abolition's" or Jubilee's (a non-event) new order in the West Indies after 1833.[21] Further, the Black maternal practice of dirt eating enacts material and symbolic collapse of the plantation estate through its failed reproductivity and a refusal to provide "normative" care for the self and others. These maternal refusals work against the grim imperative of social reproduction on the plantation.

ROSIE STOCKTON: The analytic of social reproduction is necessary for thinking about one of the most draconian and contradictory forms of carcerality that manages the reproduction of surplus population under racial capitalism: the Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentence. Ruth Wilson Gilmore has shown how, since the 1970s, the California prison boom absorbed and warehoused populations ejected from the labor market after economic crises of surplus necessitated the shifting of capital and state capacity.[22] While the majority of the masculinized workforce has been criminalized through widely discussed tough-on-crime laws, I analyze how the state has criminalized, controlled, and exploited the gendered labor/practices that reproduce "surplus populations" in the form of extreme sentencing. Debates between Marxist feminist analyses and Black left feminisms around the nature of social reproduction under racial capitalism have long sought to theorize the relationship between paid and unpaid work in the production of relative surplus value: the under and unwaged activities of reproducing life — and labor-power — that have historically fallen on feminized and racialized subjects in the private realm. As 1970s tough-on-crime laws ideologically and materially turned the unemployed worker into "the criminal," the state also managed the reproduction of "criminality," or criminalized forms of survival, in the "private" sphere through broadened frameworks of culpability that encompassed racialized, feminized, and queer subjects.

LWOP sentences that target subjects bound to the realm of social reproduction are a key aspect through which the carceral state "fixes" crises of capital and preserve state legitimacy. On the level of sentencing, my work looks to the racialized and gendered logics behind extreme sentences embodied in laws like the Felony Murder Rule, under which over 50 percent of the 5,000 LWOPs incarcerated in California prisons are sentenced, which expands intent and culpability for murder to activities such as aiding and abetting and self-defense. In my research, I provoke a comparison between the invisible labor of social reproduction and the invisible "labor" of aiding and abetting or self-defense to suggest that we cannot understand the scope of the carceral racial state if we exclude criminalized activities deeply entrenched and embedded in the private sphere.

Moreover, my work uses social reproduction to understand the division of labor inside California women's prisons, which is characterized by both paid and unpaid social reproductive labor largely dependent on women serving LWOP sentences who are often barred from the "productive" labor spheres due to their security classification. Whether or not we consider the women's prison a warehouse for surplus reproductive labor-power or the surplus of racialized existence itself, the socially reproductive labor of people serving LWOP is essential for reproducing the social and material spheres of the prison. I turn to Marxist Feminist and Black Feminist debates around the social reproduction of the household to understand what I term the "social reproduction of the warehouse."[23]

Understanding the political-economic and political-existential mechanisms through which women, queer, trans, and nonbinary people come to serve LWOP sentences is foundational to demystifying how the racial carceral state enacts accumulation by dispossession. It does so via the management, criminalization, and exploitation of the life-making practices of populations rendered at once excess to capital and foundational to the racial state's expression of its legitimacy. In my scholarly and abolitionist work, I elucidate how extreme sentencing practices that discipline and criminalize Black women and women of color developed alongside the 1970s property tax revolts and gutting of the welfare system in California. Proposition 13, or the "tax payer revolt," which enabled wealthy landowners to pay less property taxes and left poor communities

to face higher regressive taxes and fewer social services, signaled a delegitimization of the Keynesian welfare-warfare state to fund programs that enabled newly disenfranchised surplus populations to reproduce themselves. At the same time, California voters passed tough-on-crime laws targeted at managing the very same population, including the expanded use of the LWOP sentence. Given this contradiction that initiated a new character of the carceral state in California, my work posits that grassroots feminist abolitionist resistance to extreme sentences (such as the DROP LWOP campaign) is a critical intervention into a highly invisibilized realm of carceral power. I rely on genealogies of abolitionist feminisms that question the normative forms of social reproduction, such as the public/private split, gendered reproductive labor, and the racialized gender binary itself.[24]

JUDAH SCHEPT: My political and scholarly work has focused on trying to better understand carceral expansion in order to sharpen abolitionist interventions. In places like Eastern Kentucky, where much of my work has occurred, social reproduction has been a helpful analytic that has considerable explanatory power. Central Appalachia has sixteen prisons; eight of those are in Eastern Kentucky and most have been built since the late 1980s. Carceral expansion has occurred in the region across every scale of the state, from overcrowded jails to expanded and reopened state prisons to new federal prisons. As we speak, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is pursuing the construction of FCI Letcher, which if built would be the fifth federal prison in Eastern Kentucky. The expansive carceral geography has risen largely as a response to two crises: first, the rise of mass imprisonment, which is actually accelerating in Kentucky, fueled by ongoing rounds of harsh sentencing and increased criminalization and imprisonment in rural communities; and second, the collapse of the coal industry, and with it the loss of once-reliable if always exploitative opportunities for work, revenue, and social reproduction. The prisons and jails are quite directly an attempt to manage or resolve these dual crises.

As coal declined in the region, the industry offloaded the burden for social reproduction onto communities and households, even as companies had actively damaged strategies for social reproduction by contaminating water tables, polluting air, destroying streams, enclosing and devastating areas for hunting, foraging, and harvesting, and shifting production and cutting jobs through mechanization. Coal employment is now at its lowest since the 1890s; there are about double the amount of prison and jail jobs in the state of Kentucky as there are mining jobs, even as it must also be noted that jobs in the carceral economy don't necessarily go to local residents.[25] Indeed, recent studies have demonstrated that counties with federal prisons built over the last decades remain some of the poorest in one of the poorest congressional districts in the US.[26] That contradiction raises the question: if the jobs don't actually materialize, what is the work the prisons perform in the region?

With the decline of the coal industry came a loss of stable revenue attached to production levels. Prisons and jails have been used to address this decline, from jails becoming increasingly reliant on per diem payments for incarcerating state prisoners and federal detainees in order to "keep their lights on," to the significant impact of the prisons on social infrastructure.[27] Communities plan for new cages and, in turn, existing cages structure how communities plan. All over the historical record for numerous prisons that have been built in recent decades is evidence of communities grafting their hopes for survival — for their own reproduction — onto the prospect of a prison coming. Communities plan for prisons in order to help support community centers and keep health care facilities open; to justify the building or paving of roads, the extension of municipal water lines, and the renovation of waste water treatment plants; and to maintain or boost school enrollments and produce the next generation of a regional workforce — prison guards.

To put that another way, if we are serious about abolition, we have to understand the flourishing carceral geography of places like Eastern Kentucky beyond criminalization, mass incarceration, and even the changing nature of rural employment. Social reproduction theory pushes to see spaces for abolitionist intervention in the surrounding and even mundane familial, municipal and regional geographies that the carceral state mobilizes into constitutive components of its own reproduction. If we ask how it is, for example, that the prison worker arrives at the gates of the prison and jail — a central question of social reproduction theory — we encounter numerous opportunities for struggle. Most concretely, they arrive on roads, some of which are only able to be paved, widened or updated precisely because of the promise or presence of the prison and the ability to secure infrastructure funding that it can offer. Probing

further, their arrival at the prison gates is contingent on being credentialed, educated, healthy, and ideologically positioned for such work, qualities that raise the centrality of social reproduction — in the home, in the school, in the doctor's office — and which also lead us to amend our question: "what produces the conditions of possibility for the worker to arrive at the prison in Central Appalachia but also, in turn, what does the prison produce in the worker?" I will address this further in my response to our second question.

SARAH HALEY: What genealogies of thought and praxis inform your understanding of the relationship between the carceral state and social reproduction? Relatedly: how does thinking social reproduction, carceral power, and abolition together provide more gender nuance in analyses of abolition and/or elucidate any racial conundrums in analyses of social reproduction?

TIFFANY LETHABO KING: I am particularly grateful for this question about genealogies. The question provides me with an opportunity to revisit my first earnest scholarly attempt to engage with social reproduction, abolition, and the (Black) family. What is interesting, or perhaps useful, about a recounting of the history of the origins of my essay "Black 'Feminisms' and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family" is that it reveals a genealogy that is in fact meandrous, halting, inventive, and full of interruptions, shifts, and readjustments that might not be readily apparent to readers.[28] For one, I did not originally intend to engage an Afropessimist reading of the family. My original aims were quite modest and disciplinarily oriented toward a form of sociological inquiry. I set out to map various Black feminist assessments of the sociological unit of the family fifty years after the publication of the Moynihan Report. I hoped to track different Black feminist attempts to reimagine the Black family, often recast as liberatory in its matriarchal and queer formations, and understand why I rarely encountered an echo of Kay Lindsey's call for the abolition of the family. Approaching 2015, Black feminists still seemed to consider the Black family and its non-nuclear iterations worth reclaiming.

I submitted drafts of the essay to the journals *Souls* and *Critical Sociology* in 2013 and 2014. Both journals rejected the article. Eventually, I was invited by Tiffany Willoughby Herard and M. Shadee Malaklou to submit the article to their special issue on "Afropessimism and Black Feminism" that was published in *Theory & Event* in 2018. The invitation gave me an opportunity to think more critically and deeply about Black feminist postures of ambivalence, skepticism, agnosticism and even rejections of the Black family as a form of violent incorporation or a form of recognition that Saidiya Hartman would clock as attempting to "tether, bind, and oppress."[29] Writing the essay for this special issue forced me to think about the ways that bringing together Lindsey, Hartman, Angela Y. Davis, Hortense Spillers, the writer Sapphire, and Frank Wilderson into conversation might produce discordant convergences that nonetheless reveal the ways that ideological and theoretical traditions that are imagined to be incommensurate help bring conversations that nibble at the edges — abolishing the Black family — of abolitionist discourse into view.[30] While I will not argue for any kind of resolution or agreement between Afropessimist, Black feminist, Black abolitionist feminist, and Marxist feminist accounts of the grounds upon which the family should be abolished, the juncture I explored suggests that a different, more interdisciplinary, and even more rigorous reading practice is required. Interestingly, my article taking up Afropessimism put me into conversation and relationship with Marxist, transfeminist thinkers theorizing and working out family abolition on the ground like Sophie Lewis and M.E. O'Brien.[31] The unlikely affinities that conversations like family abolition facilitate need to be taken more seriously.

As I revisit Lindsey's essay and archive, I find myself wondering about the community and comrades that made her call for the abolition of the family possible. In the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, Lindsey was a Pacifica Radio contributor who hosted several shows where she moderated conversations on abortion, sexuality, radical feminism, and childlessness. She also hosted guests like Flo Kennedy, Kate Millet, Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, and Martha Gershun. I wonder how these interactions shaped her conviction that the family was a carceral formation. In "The Black Woman as a Woman," Lindsey writes, "The family and the land on which it lived and cultivated its crops became the man's property, man moved on to the seizure of the land of others and his prisoners of war became his slaves. Upon this base, the state evolved, and empires were created."[32] When I reflect upon Lindsey's understanding of the family and its

reproduction as a proliferation of warfare, I also think about ways that scholars like Joy James and Orisanmi Burton theorize carceral power as a form of war.[33]

As I turn my attention to my newer work on social reproduction — through geophagia — I continue to think with the crucial 2016 special issue in *Souls*, "Black Women's Labor: Economics, Culture, and Politics," edited by Prudence Cumberbatch, Dayo Gore, and Haley.[34] For instance, I keep returning to the guest editors' note as well as Hartman's "Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labor's" to honor the gendered texts and acts of insurgency, like geophagia and maternal refusal, that revolutionary histories often disappear.[35] In this same work, I also consider the ways Rizvana Bradley's theorization of the "maternal function" alongside James's "captive maternal" offer a glimpse into ways of inhabiting an underside of an anti-Black racial regime (or world) in ways that throw it into crisis and eventually ruin.[36]

ORISANMI BURTON: There is a lot of academic literature on social reproduction theory that has influenced me. Marx's *Capital* and Davis's "Reflections on the Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves" immediately come to mind. So we can say that my understanding is informed by a Marxist perspective and a Black radical perspective. But in a much deeper way my understanding has been informed by people who would be considered non-theorists in the sense that they do not publish peer-reviewed scholarship on the subject. My ideas developed through my parents and my extended family, many of whom were deeply involved in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

My book, *Tip of the Spear*, begins with a speech delivered in Green Haven Prison by Queen Mother Audley Moore.[37] The speech is in many ways about the need to regenerate Black revolutionary thought and praxis amid a counterinsurgency that aims to tame Black rebellion. In other words, through her speech, Moore was performing the labor of anti-carceral social reproduction. And of course, she earned her honorific — Queen Mother — because of her painstaking work to mentor, and mother, and reproduce new generations of Black militants including Muhammad Ahmad (nee Max Stanford), Malcolm X, Mutulu Shakur, and other figures who would play a key role in the prison movement. Queen Mother Moore was also a political mentor to my parents. She gave my mother her African name — Nefertiti. I have memories and photographs of sitting with her as a child and listening to her speak. Another key figure that appears early in my book is a man named Eddie Ellis, who helped establish the Harlem Black Panther Party — which is related to, yet distinct from, the formation that Huey and Bobby started a few months later — and who was in Attica during the rebellion. I didn't learn this until after he passed away, but Eddie was tight with Moore and several other individuals who I grew up calling my aunts, uncles, godmothers, and godfathers. Me and Eddie were family.

In a 2021 *American Anthropologist* article I wrote a little bit about how I began to think deeply about social reproduction and its relationship to the prison.[38] It really grew out of my correspondence with an imprisoned Black man named Absolute for whom questions of knowledge, intimacy, memory, and kinship were a matter of survival. Absolute is part of a trajectory, spanning three consecutive generations of the men in his family that have been incarcerated. At one point he and his father were locked up in the same prison at the same time; at another point he and his son were locked up in the same prison at the same time. We would write a lot to each other about manhood and fatherhood, and domestic war, and also about a lot of mundane stuff too. But in one letter Absolute told me that not only does he know my father, but that my father was the first real man he ever met in his life. I get choked up every time I think about that. He also met Eddie while he was in prison, and he cites these two men — my father and Eddie — as key figures who set him on his current path of political and intellectual development. While he does not have direct access to his biological son, Absolute struggles to carry on the tradition of mentoring younger brothers he encounters while inside.

So you see, this is a complicated question for me. There is a lot more and I'm not quite sure I know how to write about it effectively, or if I even want to. It's messy, and beautiful, and painful, and it speaks to the importance of relationship building for the long-term sustainability of our lives and our collective struggles.

ROSIE STOCKTON: My inquiry into social reproduction and LWOP sentences is motivated by the crisis in feminist carceral studies around how to mediate debates over the relationship between state management of capitalist surplus and anti-Black racial violence in shaping the contemporary prison state. Is the prison state an inev-

itable expression of anti-Black political ontologies, rooted in liberal conceptions of freedom and liberty and born from the afterlives of slavery, as scholars like Hartman have argued? Or, as Gilmore argues, is the prison a particular, historical form for managing crises of capitalist surplus, possible to alter via coalitional class struggle? I draw on Black left feminist genealogies that theorize the realm of social reproduction in order to understand contemporary carceral power and inform abolitionist strategies of refusal.

Many tendencies of Marxist feminism have worked to show how colonialism and capitalism continue to rely on racialized gendered labor in the realm of social reproduction to maintain hegemony. Since the 1970s, Marxist feminists like Sylvia Federici, Selma James, and Leopoldina Fortunati have contested how the classic Marxian theorization of the divide between production and reproductive labor failed to account for the sexual division of labor centered around the development of the household and conceptions of the nuclear family. Marxist feminists developed political demands with the goal of making unpaid domestic labor legible and illuminating how the sexual division of labor exists as an ongoing form of primitive accumulation, arguing that the domestic, private sphere was crucial for upholding the invisibilized contradictions of capital.

At the same time, Black left feminists, from Davis to Jennifer Morgan to Dorothy Roberts, have contested fundamental assumptions around whiteness and womanhood baked in Marxist feminist thought to reveal the limitations of the primary political demands expressed in the Wages for Housework Campaign, the reproductive justice and violence against women movements, and white feminism at large. Black feminist historians and critical theorists like Spillers, James, Hartman, Tiffany Lethabo King, and Sarah Haley put forth an analysis of the function of the racialized gender binary, criminalization of non-normative kinship structures, and characterized forms of dispossession and criminalization specific to Black women and women of color, opening into an abolitionist approach to gendered reproductive labor and gendered violence as documented in the work of historians like Andrea Ritchie and grassroots collectives like Survived & Punished. Challenging the unpaid reproductive and paid productive divide that undergirded Marxist feminism's analyses, Black feminist thought centers the impact of the afterlives of slavery on shaping categories of "private" and "public," womanhood, and reproductive labor under racial capitalism. This intervention is key to contemporary abolitionist feminist thought that works to dismantle the gendered and racialized foundations of the carceral state.

Following these debates, I utilize Black feminist and abolitionist feminist analysis to understand how social reproductive labor is exploited by racial capitalism while also disorienting the very category of labor. In centering people serving extreme sentences, often relegated to "political death," I apprehend different forms of social reproduction performed by criminalized and incarcerated women, queer, trans, and nonbinary people that are essential to the machinery of carcerality yet also undermine and exceed total capture. That is, everyday modes of social reproduction are not just about creating and sustaining life to the ends of waged work and carceral reproduction, but also about dismantling the political and economic structures that reproduce carcerality. These genealogies inform how I approach shifting, contradictory public policies that criminalize what is properly understood as surplus population while lifting up the criminalized social practices, kinship structures, and gendered labor that reproduces surplus population as *anticarceral life*.

JUDAH SCHEPT: In my first response I noted that in their departure from Central Appalachia, coal companies offloaded the burden of social reproduction downscale to counties, communities, and households. I used "burden" intentionally, drawing from two influential theorists of capitalism, the state, and social reproduction: Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Jessie Wilkerson. Gilmore's foundational argument about organized abandonment defines the process as "the removal of jobs, factories, benefits, schools, you name it," which in her formulation "sums up to a general burden that households and communities bear," reminding us of who pays for capital's quest for profit and the state's related reorganization.[39] Wilkerson also discusses the "burden of social reproduction," expertly pointing us at once to the gendered histories of care work in the coalfields and the ways in which such work, such as the creation of rural health clinics in Eastern Kentucky, connected in certain conjunctures to antipoverty organizing and militant labor insurrection. This essential thread of Appalachian movement history should center the question of social reproduction in any analysis of the prison-industrial complex (PIC) in the region.

As I began to discuss above, prisons and jails are sites of urgent political contestation around social reproduction. Supporters of

prison-building anticipate that the prisons will not only provide immediate relief in the form of jobs, but also will invest in the stability of the community, from producing the next generation of workers to bringing more students to schools, patients to health care facilities, support to social services, and updates and expansions to infrastructure. In a particularly distressing example, school districts, vocational schools, and colleges have all explicitly developed criminal justice programs and curricula in order to prepare young people for jobs in the carceral economy.

It is important to emphasize that there are major social differences between an economy organized around mining or a factory and one organized around imprisonment. I want to offer here two analyses that are somewhat in tension. First, renovating community and regional identities and economies around a prison portends a thoroughly racialized and gendered social order, where largely white and male Appalachian residents experiencing precarity are deputized into "violence work" to administer the captivity of other people experiencing precarity,[40] disproportionately from communities of color. We might think of this as internal and external pacification, with the prison providing new cages for the multi-racial working class and a purported economic and psychic salve for rural communities in acute crisis, including a resolution to the "surplus masculinities" produced by the decline of coal jobs.[41] An example from Eastern Kentucky is instructive. In Martin County, the USP Big Sandy federal prison opened in 2003. The 2000 census shows a 99 percent white population in the county; by 2010, the census showed a 92 percent white population and a growth from 4 to 892 Black residents in a county of just 12,000 people. The 22,000 percent growth rate of the local Black population is attributable almost entirely to their incarceration in USP Big Sandy. In the work of criminalization and employment that brings two different, and differently racialized, groups of people together in the prison but on opposite sides of the cage, separated by their relationships to state violence, the prison enacts a key function of racial capitalism, what Jodi Melamed calls "densely connected social separateness."[42]

Applying the politics of scale offers a somewhat different reading. Recent trends in criminalization and imprisonment at the state and local level in Kentucky suggest a more complex racialized and gendered social formation in and outside of cages. Kentucky has the second highest rate of incarceration for women in the US; at the same time, incarceration rates in cities have been declining and rural incarceration rates for both prisons and jails have been growing.[43] While rural is by no means code for white, it is also true that in some places in Kentucky overcrowded jails are filled with huge numbers of mostly white people. Once the foot soldiers of empire in the region, white Appalachians have been subjected to the violence of capital and the state since the arrival of wage labor, from the mine wars to bloody Harlan to black lung disease. In Eastern Kentucky, there is now a growing concentration of people subjected to criminalization and incarceration as well as the facilities that employ and cage them, and which simultaneously promise a future for some by foreclosing it for others.

The carceral realignment in the region across scales is not inevitable. There is a rich, multi-sited and multi-racial history of solidarity work against the PIC, much of which centers questions of social reproduction. A community radio show based in Letcher County broadcasts messages of love and support alongside song requests between people on the outside — family, friends, and former prisoners — to their loved ones inside the eight prisons within the show's listening range. People affiliated with the show have assisted with the development of a rideshare program, connecting people in places like Washington, DC who travel together to visit their loved ones in prisons hundreds of miles away in the mountains. They have also been central protagonists in multiple campaigns against attempts to build a prison in Letcher County. On the heels of devastating floods in 2022, after which the BOP proposed the most recent iteration of a prison in Letcher County, local organizers formed a coalition with environmental activists, movement lawyers, and people formerly incarcerated in the region in order to defeat the prison. Their demands for housing, environmental remediation, mental health, grassroots democratic planning, and development not premised on the racialized immiseration of others reveals social reproduction as an urgent terrain of abolitionist struggle.

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NOTES

1. Premilla Nadasen, *Care: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Haymarket Books, 2023), 49.
2. Sarah Haley, "Flesh Work and the Reproduction of Black Culpability" in *Antiblackness*, ed. Moon-Kie Jung and João H. Costa Vargas (Duke University Press, 2021), 136.
3. On wide-scale prison idleness, the predominance of service labor in the prison labor economy, and the minimal role of private prisons and for-profit labor in the twentieth and twenty-first century prison economy see key texts including Ruth Wilson Gilmore's preeminent book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007); Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore "Restating the Obvious," in *Indefensible Space. The Architecture of the National Insecurity State*, ed. Michael Sorkin (Routledge, 2008); and James Kilgore *Understanding Mass Incarceration: A People's Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle of Our Time* (The New Press, 2015). For other important work on the carceral economy see Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (MIT Press, 2018) and Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, *Prison Capital: Mass Incarceration and Struggles for Abolition Democracy in Louisiana* (University of North Carolina Press, 2023). While it is critical to distinguish the contemporary carceral economy from that of slavery, namely the minor role of private profit and industry in the carceral economy and the generally fixed terms of captivity among other differences, the significance of social reproduction, racialized reproduction (see note 6), and the broad capitalist imperative in antiblack captivity reflect key continuities with the slaveholding political, social, and economic regime.
4. Micol Seigel, *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police* (Duke University Press, 2018).
5. Angela Y. Davis's remarkable essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" remains a vital text in Black feminism and a critical analysis of the relationship between carceral systems and social reproduction. Davis, *The Black Scholar* 4, vol. 3 (1971). Her broader oeuvre of work on abolition, gender, prisons, and domestic work is indispensable to the concerns of this roundtable. Towering scholarship has excavated the relationship between Black reproduction, capitalism, and captivity, especially Dorothy Roberts, *Killing The Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Pantheon Books, 1997); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Saidiya Hartman, "Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18.1 (2016); and Sara Clarke Kaplan *The Black Reproductive: Unfree Labor and Insurgent Motherhood* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).
6. Judah Schept, *Coal, Cages, Crisis: The Rise of the Prison Economy in Central Appalachia* (New York University Press, 2022), 5.
7. Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the US Prison Regime* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 46.
8. Orisanmi Burton, "Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work under Domestic Warfare," *American Anthropologist* 123, no. 3 (2021): 623.
9. Orisanmi Burton, *Tip of the Spear: Black Radicalism, Prison Repression, and the Long Attica Revolt* (University of California Press, 2023), 206.
10. Dylan Rodriguez, "Insurgency & Counterinsurgency 101: A Conversation," moderated by Jared Ware, virtual lecture, January 26, 2024, by Millennials Are Killing Capitalism, Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPu-nAwky6U.
11. Burton, "Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work."
12. See Tiffany King's dissertation, *In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes,* PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2013, https://api.drum.lib.umd.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/76eff28b-5a87-4a73-8581-9b21672063b1/content.
13. Kathi Weeks argues that the demand to abolish the family was also a rare and uncommon demand for radical feminists of the 1970s and failed to gain traction over the decades. See Kathi Weeks, "Abolition of the Family: the Most Infamous Feminist Proposal," *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2023).
14. Kay Lindsey, "The Black Woman as A Woman," in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara, (Vintage Books, 1970), 105-6.
15. Tiffany Lethabo King "Geophagia: The Pull of the Earth." *Parapraxis 4* (2024).
16. Colin Chisholm quoted in Barret Bell, *"Good Eatin' Dirt" Historical Constructions of Dirt Eating in the United States* (University of Louisville, 2010), 12-13.
17. Colin Chisholm's "An Account of the Cachexia Africana," *The London Medical Journal 2* (1799).
18. See article by Joh Imray, "Observations on the Mal d'Estomac or Cachexia Africana, as it Takes Place among the Negroes of Dominica," *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* 59, no. 155 (1843). Imray treated "apprenticed" Black laborers held on plantation estates in Dominica (West Indies) after the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act was passed.
19. Imray, "Observation on the Mal d'Estomac," 307.
20. King, "Geophagia: The Pull of the Earth."
21. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997). Hartman refers to formal Emancipation in 1865 as a non-event and a continuation and intensification of racial violence and discipline against a recaptured, fungible, labor force.
22. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag.*
23. See Sylvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Power of Women Collective, 1975); Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Falling Wall Press, 1972); Angela Y. Davis, "The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Blackwell Publishers, 1998).
24. I specifically draw on Black Feminist theorists and historians of slavery that excavate legal designations of gendered labor that ejected the black enslaved from normative conscriptions of womanhood. See Davis "Reflections on the Black Woman's"; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* (1987); Hartman, "The Belly of the World"; Morgan, *Laboring Women*. I look to contemporary abolitionist feminisms that draw on this genealogy. See Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth Richie, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, (Haymarket, 2021); and Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober, eds. *Abolition Feminisms Vol. 1. Organizing, Survival, and Transformative Practice* (Haymarket, 2022).
25. *Kentucky Quarterly Coal Report 2025*, Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet, 2025, https://eec.ky.gov/Energy/News-Publications/Pages/quarterly-coal-dashboard.aspx; *Occupational Employment and Wages, Correctional Officers and Jailers*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023 https://www.bls.gov/oes/2023/may/oes333012.htm. For a broader discussion of these trends, see Schept, *Coal, Cages, Crisis.*
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28. Tiffany Lethabo King, “Black ‘Feminisms’ and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan’s Negro Family,” *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018).

29. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 5.

30. I bring several ideological, theoretical, and disciplinary perspectives into conversation to broach the unpopular discussion of the abolition of the (Black) family in Black feminist traditions. Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role”; Kay Lindsey, “The Black Woman as a Woman”; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Macmillan, 2008); Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”; Sapphire, Push (Vintage Books, 1998); Frank Wilderson, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and Structures of US Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

31. Sophie Lewis’ and Michelle O’Brien’s Marxist feminist analyses are capacious enough to seriously contend with autonomist Marxist, psychoanalytic, radical feminist, and afropessimist contributions to discussions of social reproduction and the abolition of the family. See Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Verso Books, 2022); and M. E. O’Brien, *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care* (Pluto Press, 2023).

32. Lindsey, “The Black Woman as A Woman,” 104.

33. See Joy James, ed. *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* (Duke University Press, 2007); and Burton, *Tip of the Spear*.

34. Prudence Cumberbatch, Dayo F. Gore, and Sarah Haley, “Guest Editors’ Note,” *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016).

35. Hartman’s “The Belly of the World,” 171.

36. Rizvana Bradley, “Vestiges of Motherhood: The Maternal Function in Recent Black Cinema,” *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017); and Bradley’s *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthesis and the Critique of Form* (Stanford University Press 2023). See also Joy James, “The Womb of Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft, and the Captive Maternal,” *Carceral Notebooks* 12, no.1 (2016).

37. Burton, *Tip of the Spear*, 1–3.

38. Burton, “Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work.”

39. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice* (University of Illinois Press, 2019).

40. I borrow this term from Seigel, *Violence Work*.

41. On the instrumentalization of surplus masculinities into the exercise of state violence, see Burton, 2024; Deborah Cowen and Amy Siciliano. “Surplus Masculinities and Security,” *Antipode* 43(5): 1516 – 1541; and Andrea Morrell. *Prison Town: Making the Carceral State in Elmira, NY*. University of Nebraska, 2025.

42. Jodi Melamed. “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 81.

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"We Aren't Locking Up!" Making Life on the Inside

SARA MATTHIESEN

One evening in December of 1975, correctional officials informed women imprisoned at the California Institution for Women (CIW) that they were barring outside visitors from attending the upcoming Christmas party. They cited security concerns as the justification. In response a group of women filled a trash can with holiday decorations, lit them on fire, and hurled the flaming can of merriment-turned-protest through the superintendent's office window. This act was the start of a five hundred-person rebellion that shut down the prison until the early hours of the morning. The uprising was quelled only by state violence, personified through numerous state and county officers who joined CIW staff in unleashing tear gas and other chemical agents on the women, flying a helicopter over the grounds that blinded them with its searchlight, and firing multiple warning shots that ultimately forced women back into their cells. The decision to bar visitors was merely the tipping point for women confined by an institution designed to dehumanize them. On this night they acted on a fundamental insight gained from their experience of incarceration: in conditions that were never meant to support life-making, it is necessary to fight for your life.[1]

In this article I explore the uprising at CIW alongside other experiments in making life on the inside through the feminist frameworks of social reproduction and prison abolition. I draw especially on debates begun by Marxist and socialist feminists in the 1970s over how to best characterize social reproduction and consider these alongside abolition's dual mandate to decarcerate and build new worlds. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the varied effects of efforts that strive to make relations of care — familial and otherwise — possible across prison walls in the era of mass incarceration. How does our assessment of relations of care, famously claimed as work by Marxist feminists, change when they are performed inside the prison? Under the current regime of racial capitalism defined in part by mass incarceration, does social reproduction behind bars reproduce or extend beyond capital's logics, or both? Alternatively, does it create something else altogether?

If the function of the prison is historically specific, then how we interpret the activities of those behind its walls must take into account the changing purposes of incarceration at distinct moments in history. In my prior work on histories of struggle over incarcerated women's family making in California's state and federal prisons, I engaged these questions largely by emphasizing the exploitative effects of mass incarceration.[2] *Reproduction Reconceived* framed the efforts of incarcerated women and their advocates on the outside to maintain familial ties as a new form of reproductive labor specific to late twentieth-century racial capitalism made manifest in incarceration as "incapacitation."[3] I interpreted incarcerated women's actions as resistive, but by conceptualizing them first and foremost as reproductive labor, I downplayed a key insight of Marxist thought: that capital will never totally dominate because "there can be no labor without life."[4] This decision stemmed from my interest in how to trace "reproductive labor" to places beyond the home — the quintessential site of both normative familial reproduction and 1970s autonomous Marxist feminists' critique.[5] This move was necessary for centering the familial relations of racially marginalized women historically excluded from the normative family, a deliberate exclusion that justified exploiting their reproductive labor to maintain families other than their own.[6] While I prioritized following reproductive labor to various sites where family was being made in

spite of violence and neglect, I could have done more to theorize the concept in relation to women's different conditions. In the case of incarcerated women's family making, this would have meant making the political economy of the prison and its role in managing the contradictions of late twentieth-century racial capitalism more of a central player in my analysis.

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Following Sharon Luk's invitation to abolitionist scholars and activists to bring social reproduction to the center of studies on incarceration, here I foreground the relational quality of imprisonment and incarcerated women's efforts to maintain family.[7] I begin by examining different frameworks that have endeavored to expose the harms of incarceration, focusing especially on how feminist scholars have theorized the impacts of mass incarceration on reproduction. In this analysis I make the case for more carefully distinguishing between the reproduction of life and the reproduction of labor-power that are at once implied by the term social reproduction, so that organizing strategies which mobilize care do not inadvertently serve capital's expansion. In the next section I detail how women incarcerated in California's state and federal prisons and their outside advocates challenged the violences of carceral neglect. I read these efforts as instances of what Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober describe as the "ethical life-making" of abolition feminism.[8] I conclude by looking at contemporary struggles over violence and abolition taking place at these two prisons.

Throughout I keep in view the inherent friction between the reproduction of life and the reproduction of labor in order to ask when and under what conditions such efforts might also entail exploitation. What follows makes the case for seeing family making on the inside as moments of abolition. Simultaneously, however, I gesture to organizing conditions that could produce both exploitative and abolitionist effects. I try to read these historical and contemporary struggles through a dynamic lens in which there is no pure outside of racial capitalism, even as there is everywhere evidence of what Susan Ferguson describes as "lives . . . organized against capital" constantly reaching beyond it.[9]

EXPOSING THE REPRODUCTIVE HARMS OF INCARCERATION

Few frameworks have done more to illuminate the reproductive harms of incarceration than the Black feminist concept of reproductive justice (RJ). Scholars examining incarcerated women and reproduction from various disciplines have mobilized the framework for what RJ founder and scholar-activist Loretta J. Ross has described as its "amplifying" powers, demonstrating how "prisons are sites of reproductive injustice" in relation to each of RJ's three principles: the right not to have children, the right to have children, and the right to raise children in safety and with dignity.[10] Organizing led by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and their communities has also played a central role in bringing RJ to bear on women's experiences of reproductive injustice on the inside. Campaigns against the practice of shackling during labor and delivery and forced sterilization by prison physicians are especially visible examples of reproductive justice activism targeting the harms of incarceration.[11]

Collectively this scholarship and activism have made clear that there is no role for prisons in a world where reproductive justice is available to all.[12] At the same time this body of work has had less to say about the function of prisons to historically specific regimes of racial capitalism. This analysis has more frequently come from scholars who foreground the relationship between the state and capital's shifting labor needs in their assessment of modes of punishment.[13] Ruth Wilson Gilmore's groundbreaking study of the prison buildup in California, *Golden Gulag*, brings Black Marxism and critical geography to bear on the "punitive turn" that inaugurated what is now widely known as mass incarceration in the United States. Gilmore's argument that prison construction made use of various surpluses threatening both capital and the state's legitimacy in the wake of late twentieth-century deindustrialization and economic decline illuminates how

punishment provided a dual solution for managing the population of under- and unemployed poor men of color in California. Through the hypercriminalization of participation in illicit economies and intense surveillance of youth of color, men were made into "criminals" according to preexisting, entrenched racial hierarchies which also ensnared poor whites. More "criminals" justified more prisons. California's relative surplus population was made useful —not through captive, productive labor as the widely popular "New Jim Crow" thesis would have it, but by keeping idleness and its attendant deprivations contained and hidden away. [14]

Feminist scholars have drawn on Gilmore's analysis to bring feminized social reproduction to the forefront of analyses that understand prisons in relation to the imperatives of contemporary racial capitalism. In their study on the carceral logics of disability confinement in California's past and present, Jess Whatcott illustrates how "detention is eugenics."[15] Vrindavani Avila's and Jennifer Elyse James's analysis of forced sterilizations in California state prisons similarly frame incarceration "as a form of structural eugenics."[16] They detail how fictions of racialized "fitness," necessitated by racial capitalism and reproduced through the white heteropatriarchal family, also require "deviant bodies" who are denied their right to procreation and family on the basis of "public safety."[17] Forms of punishment such as long sentences that subsume the entirety of one's fertile years, forced sterilization, and the disruption of kin and community ties illustrate how prisons determine which groups of people will be able to reproduce themselves and be legible as family.

These analyses illuminate Luk's argument that the dispossession accomplished by incarceration is best understood as a struggle over "the modes and means of social reproduction, struggles mediating the historical contours of life and death."[18] Here Luk builds on Gilmore's observation that "prisons wear out places by wearing out people, regardless of whether they have done time."[19] Luk elaborates the stakes of Gilmore's point by drawing on Marxian feminist thought that sees social reproduction as the central terrain of struggle against racial capitalism. Social reproduction is fertile ground for resistance because the activities required to (re)produce labor-power necessarily also (re)produce life. This remains true regardless of the metrics, categories, and violences imposed by historically specific regimes of racial capitalism. For example, Black Marxist feminists examining enslaved women's dual labors under slavery have long made this point about enslaved people's networks of kin and community. Reprising Angela Davis' groundbreaking insights about enslaved women's role within the family and its impact on Black feminist scholarship, Sarah Haley has recently argued, "socially reproductive labor creates something *other and in excess of* a captive labor force, namely Black life."[20] Across historically distinct regimes of dispossession, the life needs and desires of human beings, as Ferguson has argued, "can and will assert themselves against capital time and again."[21]

In the case of mass incarceration, where criminalization and imprisonment work together to make surplus populations disposable and then contain them, a focus on social reproduction raises important questions about life making on the inside. If punishment in the age of mass incarceration is defined precisely by not putting incarcerated people to work to produce things or future workers, how should we understand efforts that refuse the carceral imperative to render life idle?[22] Are such refusals best understood as social reproduction if the prison has no use for or interest in the labor-power reproduced alongside life? And what should we make of another Marxist feminist insight — namely, that because most activities associated with social reproduction take place in spaces and relations less directly disciplined by capital, life-making can take precedent over reproducing labor-power? As Davis famously argued, enslaved women's work in their own households was "the *only* labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor."[23] How does the idea that "the unpaid work of social reproduction is sufficiently 'outside' capital to be highly flexible" translate to the inside of a prison where surveillance, violence, and neglect attempt to keep people from life?[24]

"In the case of mass incarceration, where criminalization and imprisonment work together to make surplus populations disposable and then contain them, a focus on social reproduction raises important questions about life making on the inside.

These questions point to the issue of how to distinguish between social reproduction in the service of capital and social reproduction in the service of life. For feminist abolitionists engaged in what Bierria, Caruthers, and Lober describe as the "long arc of ethical life-making and everyday practice" of willing "an impossible future while resisting the deadly chaos of the present," this distinction is of critical importance.[25] It is worth trying to untangle "ethical life-making" from reproductive labor — both of which are frequently implied by the term social reproduction — in our organizing strategies. Such an effort aligns with the vigilance exercised by abolitionists against "reformist reforms," or reforms that retrench and expand carceral power and extend the reach of racial capitalism into our lives.[26] This is not a straightforward task because, as Harry Cleaver has argued, there is an "antagonistic two-sidedness of everyday activities: to some degree they contribute to the reproduction of labor-power and to some degree they may break free of such subordination to capital."[27] Lean too far towards social reproduction as exploitation and racial capitalism becomes all-encompassing. This is a recurring critique of 1970s autonomous Marxist feminist thought that theorized women's subordination as a product of capitalist exploitation of women's reproductive labors, an idea most widely popularized through the Wages for Housework campaign.[28] When domination is everywhere, moments of self-determination are obscured, while appeals to adequately value care by understanding it as work risk reinscribing the logics of capital and the racialized gendered division of labor.[29] Lean too far in the other direction — social reproduction as life-making beyond capital — and all caring activities become revolutionary, making it difficult to explore how care's entanglement with structural inequalities necessarily shapes organizing that makes caring a central strategy.[30]

The antagonism Cleaver describes becomes less murky in the context of mass incarceration. In the current prison regime designed to bring life to a halt, any life-affirming practices are a refusal to remain idle or succumb to death and therefore flout the prison's function under racial capitalism. Recent histories of incarcerated women's organizing and support networks in the United States and Puerto Rico make abundantly clear just how life-affirming such activities are. These studies describe incarcerated people's acts ranging from AIDS peer education to sharing food to maintaining visiting programs for outside advocates as "care work." This aligns with socialist and Marxist feminist theorizing and serves to combat the devaluation of care as a political strategy. At the same time, the dual effect of social reproduction on the outside — reproducing ourselves as workers that expand capital and reproducing ourselves as lives always in excess of this mandate — does not easily translate to life on the inside.[31] When incarcerated women care for one another and organize together on the inside, they are refusing to adhere to the prison's aim of incapacitation. This is also a refusal of imprisonment as a solution to the crises of late twentieth and twenty-first century racial capitalism, and thus a rejection of the logic that life be subordinated to capital.

As Heather Berg has argued about the "militant care" performed by sex workers with and for one another, such practice "prepares us for struggle more than it reproduces us to maintain the status quo."[32] For members of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP), an organization guided by the motto "caring collectively," the support, care, and organizing forged inside and across prison walls are most accurately described as feminist abolition. This assertion reframes "care as crucial to abolition" in contrast to anti-prison organizing that elevates acts of resistance like riots and hunger strikes over collective care.[33] These observations are especially illuminating in the context of activities aimed at strengthening incarcerated women's claims to their children. Reproductive labor is often described colloquially as the reproduction of the next generation of workers. However, when incarcerated women demand to be regarded as parents and force the prison to accommodate their parental desires in the prison-as-warehouse era, they are insisting on a world that is incompatible with carceral, capitalist logics.

At the same time, incarcerated women's familial ties necessarily extend beyond prison walls by virtue of their children's tenuous freedom.[34] When efforts to support women's family making take place beyond the prison's warehousing grasp to incarcerated women's children, for example, exploitation and abolition arguably bleed into one another. Here, the dynamic in which labor-power and life are produced simultaneously is once again at play, and individuals must steal as much life as possible during the activities of social reproduction. This is made all the more difficult by the multi-pronged threat of criminalization that poor families of color are most subject to, a role carried out in part by the "capitalist state" so as to "keep the formal inequality of capitalism acceptable to the polity," to

return to Gilmore.[35] In bringing together the histories and stories in this paper, I want to explore the paradox of care as both abolitionist and exploitative in greater detail. I keep in mind the above insight that social reproduction on the outside more frequently serves capital's need for labor-power than life-making on the inside — even as inside-outside organizing ensures these two realms remain interconnected. Collectively, the examples considered here suggest that in addition to liberatory but precarious moments of family making and care inside the prison, the "ethical life-making" practiced by feminist abolitionists must engender, to invoke Ferguson again, "lives . . . organized against capital" in all places and under all conditions where life resides.[36]

LIFE STOLEN BY — AND FROM — CARCERAL NEGLECT

I was hesitant to emphasize a single finding from my previous work on feminist struggle in California's state and federal prisons as especially alarming, given that it details in numerous ways the violence of incarceration during the 1970s and early 1980s. However, I have returned more than once to this: "It is unclear just how many children were stolen from their families as a result of the institutional neglect baked into incarceration and child welfare services."[37] I wrote this sentence to reflect my reading of two studies investigating the impact of incarceration on women and their children conducted by researchers at CIW in 1960 and 1961, respectively.[38] The research documented how women were barred from communications between CIW and child welfare services regarding the whereabouts of their children as well as their legal standing as parents. Correctional staffers' refusal to provide women any information about their children or facilitate communication with state agencies frequently culminated in child welfare services placing children in foster care and/or up for adoption — typically without women's knowledge, involvement, or consent. One researcher approvingly described correctional staffers' refusal to answer women's repeated questions about their children as an intentional practice designed to facilitate the emotional separation necessary to aid the legal revocation of parental rights — a move frequently motivated by the express desire to get children into adoptive families and off of public aid.[39] The neglect and coercion researchers documented did not mean the investigators took incarcerated women at their word, even as they recorded their numerous protestations: demands to know what "their rights were," a refusal to discuss their children with social workers because "I don't trust them," and assertions that "it is unfair for the courts to take our babies away from us while we're in here and can't defend ourselves."[40] These clear expressions of women's concern about their children and their legal standing as parents were interpreted by one researcher as "conscious or unconscious distortions by inmate-mothers as to the adequacy of the care they gave their children before they were incarcerated" and as motivated by "what would gain institutional approval and the earliest parole date."[41] Both researchers used their findings to recommend that correctional staff do more to aid women in accepting the loss of their children so as to prevent them from "sabotaging sound arrangements made for the children."[42]

My use of the word "unclear" in the sentence describing this violence above was partially due to archival gaps in the Department of Corrections Records, housed in the California State Archives where I conducted research. Both the studies and other records documenting the conditions at CIW provided only a snapshot of what happened to women's children. At least some of these gaps were created by women themselves. Researchers noted that some of the 814 women they surveyed in the early 1960s refused to participate due to fears that the information would make their children vulnerable to state intervention.[43] But my use of the word "stolen" was an attempt to counterbalance that uncertainty.[44] The archives did not contain an exact number, but I did not want this to cloud readers' ability to share in my certainty that both state officials and the researchers who so eagerly wanted to study so-called "inmate-mothers" were to blame for women's loss of their children and children's loss of their parents. While in the 1960s white women comprised the majority of incarcerated women at CIW, the enduring, shapeshifting link between criminalization and Blackness ensured that Black women were disproportionately represented in the state prison.[45] Researchers' inability or refusal to believe that women's parental concerns were genuine drew on and reasserted this link in the form of parental "distortions" supposedly made evident by women's legal crimes of soliciting sex and social crimes of single motherhood and divorce.[46] Black women's overrepresentation in this prison as compared with the general population in California

at the time no doubt means that then, like now, poor Black mothers who could not turn to relatives for help with child-rearing were especially likely to have their families "torn apart" when state institutions exercised their administrative power.[47]

But how can children be "stolen" by something as passive as "neglect?" By theorizing "carceral neglect," I was attempting to foreground the moments where the violence of prison is enacted through officials' willful inaction, a refusal to attend to life. The medical neglect endemic to carceral institutions is another salient example, and certainly prison guards ignored pregnant women's repeated and urgent requests for medical attention just as they did their repeated and urgent requests for information about their children. In both instances, neglect was just as punishing a force as overt acts of violence. Correctional staff's refusal to care for women's medical concerns — or to generally attend to the health needs of pregnant incarcerated people — could mean an infant stolen by death. Welfare officials' refusal to care for women's parental autonomy and legal standing could mean an infant stolen by the state. Returning to Luk's invitation to approach incarceration as "a struggle over the modes and means of social reproduction," we can understand such violence at CIW as the logical outcome of the prison-warehouse designed to bring both life and labor to a halt.[48]

Researchers at CIW interpreted women's concern for their children as efforts at sabotage, but the distorted lenses through which they viewed incarcerated people meant they missed the saboteurs' actual target: the conditions that defined confinement. In the years that followed these reports, those incarcerated at CIW insisted on and carried out a variety of life-making activities despite correctional staff's systemic protocol of neglect. In superintendent Brooke Carey's report of the 1975 Christmas riot to her boss, then-Director of the California Department of Corrections J.J. Enomoto, she described the uprising as a "spontaneous release of hostility" rather than a "pre-planned" protest.[49] Such anodyne language might be convincing were it not for the reports from other correctional staff. Reading across these documents makes clear that the 1975 uprising was years of cumulative insults in the making. When a sergeant tried to persuade women to return to their cottages by assuring them they had been heard, one woman reportedly responded, "You motherfuckers always say, 'yeah, we'll take care of it,' but you fuckers never doing anything, so we are not locking up."[50] Carceral neglect was a central component of incarceration as incapacitation, but in disruptive demands for their children and rejections of constraint, women at CIW refused to relinquish their right to family, kin, community, and life.

While incarcerated women at CIW and their advocates on the outside took on the Department of Corrections through legislation and lawsuits aimed at improving conditions for pregnant women and mothers, women imprisoned at a federal prison nearly four hundred miles away in northern California endeavored to make FCI Dublin hospitable to life in another way: through a children's center.[51] The group Prison Mothers and Their Children (MATCH) was started by incarcerated women and outside advocates in 1978. It was based on a belief that the separation inherent to imprisonment harmed women and their children equally; the Pleasanton Children's Center was a space where they could "restore family ties." Here incarcerated women could spend the entire weekend with their children in recognition of the fact that "meaningful contact between parents and their children during imprisonment," in addition to other resources that addressed their needs, was necessary to mitigate harm.[52]

For ten years, Prison MATCH tried to overcome the carceral neglect that devastated incarcerated people's familial relations by supporting life in myriad ways. The majority of incarcerated staff adapted "normative" child development models to account for the impact an imprisoned parent had on children's development and helped children make sense of the multiple caretakers in their lives. Members conducted political education around the incarceration of primary caretakers of small children while constantly coordinating with sympathetic foster parents so that children could get to the prison every weekend. In order to legitimize and destigmatize women's experiences of parenting from behind bars, they developed a certificate program in Child Development in hopes that members could bring their expertise to early child development programs such as Head Start upon release. They fundraised to keep the program afloat and barred correctional staff from any formal participation so as to prioritize incarcerated women's authority. They insisted that the program needed a dedicated social worker if women were to have any say over their child's welfare during incarceration and upon release. And they attempted to address the issues consistently aised by women incarcerated at FCI Dublin, such as medical neglect, particularly with regards to prenatal care. During the ten years this

version of Prison MATCH was operational, inside and outside staff, along with the program's advisory board of incarcerated mothers, helped start similar programs at seven other correctional institutions.

Members of Prison MATCH leveraged cracks in the edifice of imprisonment in order to mobilize the prison in service of life. While then-warden Charles Turnbo initially rejected the original proposal of a seven-day a week children's center, he was willing to compromise with advocates on the weekend model and eventually became an enthusiastic supporter. An outside member used her professional connections at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) to secure funding for the first four years of the program which shielded organizers from the demands of fundraising while they found their footing. This financial support was also undoubtedly greased by the fact that rehabilitation still held some political currency on the eve of California's prison construction boom. And the fact that FCI Dublin put no funds or personnel towards the running of the program but could still claim it as a success made for mostly amicable relations whilst protecting members' authority over the program.[53]

“ Members of Prison MATCH leveraged cracks in the edifice of imprisonment in order to mobilize the prison in service of life.

Cleaver's observation about the "antagonistic two-sidedness" of social reproduction is useful for thinking through many of Prison MATCH's initiatives, especially given the organization's necessary connections to the outside. When foster parents and relatives brought children to visit their parents in the Center on weekends, they were at once performing the reproductive labor of child-rearing, reuniting families, and refusing to reproduce normative models of motherhood that justified severing incarcerated women's parental rights. When inside-outside staff and community members ran the program without any support from the prison, they reclaimed life and agency from confinement while their labors repaired harms they had not perpetrated and for which prison officials, social service workers, and politicians should have been accountable. And when Prison MATCH organizers initiated a certificate program in child development based on their experiential expertise, they were preparing themselves to perform paid reproductive labor upon release while undoing dominant logics which framed incarceration as disqualifying for future employment and parenthood. That these effects were being produced simultaneously is both challenging and hopeful. They illustrate the ease with which caring as a political strategy can become exploitative in a punishing society where care is made a scarce resource. At the same time, they demonstrate how abolitionist life-making on the inside requires and produces the same on the outside, refusing containment despite the prison's best efforts.

Assessment reports written for the NCCD characterized Prison MATCH's "first years, 1978-1982" as "full of growth, change, and excitement."[54] But as politicians on both sides of the aisle bolstered their "tough on crime" credentials by turning people into "criminals," and as the state resolved numerous crises by funding prison construction, these forces also narrowed the cracks that gave Prison MATCH its tenuous if promising foothold. When federal and state politicians passed harsher sentencing laws that created a crisis of overcrowding in the nation's prisons, 250 of the women incarcerated at FCI Dublin were transferred to facilities far from their families and with no similar parent-child programs. When outside members went to Washington, DC to protest these and other changes wrought by mass incarceration, Prison MATCH's value to the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) ceased outweighing its costs. The version of the program envisioned and lived out by Prison MATCH's founders ended in 1988 when the BOP awarded a contract to a different agency promising to offer services at a lower rate. Members considered this decision patent retaliation for their repeated agitation on behalf of women who had been transferred out of the state. Prison MATCH and its power to restore family ties were a vital source of life within a "death-dealing" institution, as is made clear by the abrupt removal of it from women's lives. One woman who had been transferred far from California to a state prison and still had much of her fifteen-year sentence to serve pleaded for help from Prison MATCH asking, "How can I make it not knowing what is happening to my family?"[57]

THE NECESSITY OF ABOLITION

Like the fate of women studied by researchers in the early 1960s, it is not clear from the archives I consulted what happened to this woman and her family upon being transferred from FCI Dublin.[58] What clarity I hope this history does offer, however, is that any moments where carceral neglect loses out to life are as hard-fought and tenuous as they are life-saving and liberatory. The urgent need for the rapid proliferation of such moments is demonstrated by the conditions that made it possible for women's children to be stolen in the late twentieth century, conditions that continue to render incarcerated people vulnerable to incredible violence in the twenty-first. CIW made headlines in 2013 when the Center for Investigative Reporting provided evidence of systematic forced sterilization in California's women's prisons between 2006–2010.[59] Research conducted by those who worked to document this abuse and the activism against it in the documentary film *Belly of the Beast* found that nearly 1,400 people were sterilized between 1997 and 2013.[60] In 2021 a historic campaign led by California Coalition for Women Prisoners' Reparations 4 Reproductive Justice seeking to provide monetary compensation to those sterilized won $7.5 million from the state of California, the first legislative victory of its kind.[61] Reporting on the program's rollout reflected what activists involved with the campaign always knew would be a challenge — that despite the bill mandating survivor involvement, their marginalization during the creation of the program ultimately weakened its impact.[62] In contrast, CCWP's memorial quilt project, "Together We Rise, Together We Heal," centered those most impacted and allowed for repair through community.[63] While the monetary compensation undoubtedly made a difference in the lives of those who successfully navigated the program, the harms that occurred throughout the program's creation and implementation also attests to the existential difficulties of repairing what a life might have been with a check.

Both CIW and FCI Dublin have also been the subjects of lawsuits brought by incarcerated women who experienced sexual assault by correctional staff.[64] Sexual abuse was so rampant at FCI Dublin that the BOP announced it was closing the federal prison in spring 2024, leaving the women incarcerated there to agonize over what being transferred would mean for their connections to family for at least the second time in the institution's history.[65] The warden, Ray J. Garcia, and the prison chaplain, James Theodore Highhouse, were two of eight FCI Dublin employees charged with sexually abusing incarcerated women. Notably, Garcia was responsible for leading compliance trainings to make sure staff followed the requirements of the Prison Rape Elimination Act.[66] It is always a charade when those in power are charged with limiting their own reach, but the results are especially disturbing when turning the gears of an institution that dehumanizes by design is your job. The abuse of power baked into the carceral system has similarly enabled abuse to go unaddressed for years in California's states prisons where the responsibility for investigating reports of sexual violence brought forward by incarcerated people lies with California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) staff. Investigative reporting and state audits revealed that CDCR staff dismissed the majority of complaints.[67] These outcomes are precisely why Prison MATCH organizers refused to enlist guards into the operations of the program, even when they expressed sympathetic interest. Members were clear that "their role as guards" categorically prohibited correctional staff from advocating for families, just as contemporary advocates insist that at a bare minimum, there should be an independent system for investigating reports of abuse.[68]

Most importantly, however, is that those involved in exposing the abuse at California's state prisons and FCI Dublin believe the surest way to end the violence endemic to these institutions is by freeing once and for all those currently held in its grasp.[69] No doubt this is because they share a profound understanding of the challenges inherent in seizing life from an institution intent on dehumanization to the point of death. In *Reproduction Reconceived*, I characterized women's efforts as "reproductive labor that made family possible . . . in the space of carceral neglect."[70] I emphasized the exploitative side of these practices, both in terms of the labor performed and the costs to women and their children when community efforts were insufficient to mitigate the violent outcomes of carceral neglect. Here and now, in the bleakness of a political moment where those in power have a political vision that amounts to "preparing for the end of the world" — it feels crucial to highlight the life-making activities that elude the deadly grip of racial capitalism.[71] In the 1970s and 1980s, people incarcerated in California's women's prisons and their communities temporarily created conditions capable of nurturing life from within an institution meant to bring it to a halt. They wielded the prison to other, more generative ends and put the

institution at odds with its own mandates. Abolition feminism as "ethical life-making" consists of every moment where individuals live in "a more healthy manner and more joyfully" than the reproduction of capital could ever allow or even imagine.[72] At the same time, the fact that such moments must be repeatedly seized and are often met with repression aimed at restoring the prison's intended function demonstrates why women at CIW refused to "lock up" in 1975, and why abolition feminists today insist we must "free them all."

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NOTES

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1. For a fuller account of the uprising at CIW, see Sara Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived: Family Making and the Limits of Choice after Roe v. Wade* (UC Press, 2021), 58–61.
2. Sara Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived: Family Making and the Limits of Choice after Roe v. Wade* (UC Press, 2021).
3. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007), 21; Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, Ch. 2.
4. Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (Pluto Press, 2020), 126.
5. Key texts by autonomous Marxist feminists active in the Italian New Left during the 1970s include Silvia Federici, *Wages against Housework* (Power of Women Collective, 1975); Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Falling Wall Press Ltd, 1975); Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcana of Reproduction: Housewives, Prostitutes, Workers, and Capital* (Verso Books, 2025).
6. Dororthy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Vintage Books, 1997); Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 1 (1992); and Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Premilla Nadasen, *Care: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Verso, 2024); Sarah Haley, "'Like I Was a Man': Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 1(2013); Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work, 2nd Ed.* (Stanford University Press, 2015).
7. Sharon Luk, "Ourselves at Stake: Social Reproduction in the Age of Prisons," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 18, no. 3 (2018).
8. Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober, "Abolition Feminisms in Transformative Times," in *Abolition Feminisms Volume 1*, ed. Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober (Haymarket Books, 2022), 11.
9. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 119.
10. Ross describes reproductive justice as "an amplifying, organizing concept to shed light on the intersectional forms of oppression that threaten Black women's bodily integrity." Loretta Ross, "Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism," *Souls* 19, no. 3 (2017): 293; Rachel Roth, "'She Doesn't Deserve to Be Treated Like This': Prisons as Sites of Reproductive Injustice," in *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundations, Theory, Practice, Critique*, edited by Loretta J. Ross et al. (The Feminist Press, 2017). For a key text that helped inaugurate this approach see Rickie Solinger et al., eds., *Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States* (University of California Press, 2010). For recent publications that explicitly engage all three principles see Alice Cavanaugh et al., "Lived Experiences of Pregnancy and Prison Through a Reproductive Justice Lens: A Qualitative Meta-synthesis," *Social Science & Medicine* 307 (2022); Vrindavani Avila and Jennifer Eylse James, "Controlling Reproduction and Disrupting Family Formation: California Women's Prisons and the Violence Legacy of Eugenics," *Societies* 14, no. 5 (2024); Crystal M. Hayes, Carolyn Sufrin, and Jamila B. Perritt, "Reproductive Justice Disrupted: Mass Incarceration as a Driver of Reproductive Oppression," *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. S1 (2020).
11. For a discussion of these campaigns and their growing visibility, see Priscilla Ocen and Julia Chinyere Oparah, "Embodied Abolition: Prisons, Pregnancy and the Struggle for Birth Justice," in *Birthing Justice: Black Women, Pregnancy, and Childbirth*, edited by Alicia D. Bonaparte and Julia Chinyere Oparah (Routledge, 2023), 250-254. For examples of how feminist abolitionist organizations are mobilizing the framework of RJ in service of feminist abolition see California Coalition for Women Prisoners, "Reproductive Justice x Abolition," https://womenprisoners.org/rj-abolition/ and Justice Now, "Prisons as a Tool of Reproductive Oppression," in *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics*, ed. Jess Whatcott (Duke University Press, 2024), 9.
12. Scholars and activists mobilize this relationship in different ways but nevertheless argue that reproductive justice and abolition strengthen one another. See Ocen and Oparah, "Embodied Abolition"; Jess Whatcott, "No Selves to Consent: Women's Prisons, Sterilizations, and the Biopolitics of Informed Consent," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no.1 (2018); Cavanaugh et al., "Lived Experiences of Pregnancy and Prison Through a Reproductive Justice Lens"; Vrindavani Avila and Jennifer Elyse James, "Controlling Reproduction and Disrupting Family Formation." For a key text that brings reproductive justice to bear on women's experiences of incarceration, see Solinger et al., *Interrupted Life*. For an example that mobilizes reproductive justice as both analytical tool and proposed remedy, see Hayes, Sufrin, and Perritt, "Reproductive Justice Disrupted."
13. See Georg Rusche and Gerda Dinwiddie, "Labor Market and Penal Sanction: Thoughts on the Sociology of Criminal Justice," *Crime and Social Justice* 10 (1978); Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (UNC Press, 2016); Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America* (Verso Books, 1990).
14. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, Ch. 1. For the "New Jim Crow" thesis, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2010).
15. Whatcott theorizes "carceral eugenics" to analyze "how state confinement functions to control the reproduction and life chances of groups of people who have been deemed biologically undesirable." Whatcott, *Menace to the Future*, 3.
16. Avila and James, "Controlling Reproduction and Disrupting Family Formation," 3.
17. Avila and James, "Controlling Reproduction and Disrupting Family Formation," 3.
18. Luk, "Ourselves at Stake," 234.
19. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 17.
20. Haley continues, "Davis is the foundational theorist of the domestic as a site for the production of Black life beyond racial capitalism; accordingly, her essay demands that the terrain of Black liberation be reoriented to the realm of care and intimacy, both historically and in the present." Sarah Haley, Shoniqua Roach, Emily Owens, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Confinement, Interiority, Black Feminist Study," *The Black Scholar* 51, no. 1 (2021): 5.
21. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 128, 126.
22. See also James Kilgore in addition to Gilmore and Luk on this point. James Kilgore, "Confronting Prison Slave Labor Camps and Other Myths," *Social Justice Blog*, August 28, 2013, https://socialjusticejournal.org/confronting-prison-slave-labor-camps-and-other-myths/.
23. Haley highlights Dorothy Roberts's elaboration of this claim in her field-defining work on reproductive justice, *Killing the Black Body*. Quoted in Haley et al.,

"Confinement, Interiority, Black Feminist Study," 4–5.

24. Ferguson, *Women and Work*, 127.
25. Bierria, Caruthers, and Lober, *Abolition Feminisms Volume* 1, 11, 12.
26. For an extended analysis of how left social movements coalesced around "non-reformist reforms" under neoliberalism, see Amna Akbar, "Non-Reformist Reforms and Struggles over Life, Death, and Democracy," *Yale Law Journal* 132, no. 8 (2023).
27. Harry Cleaver, "Self-Valorization in Mariarosa Dalla Costa's 'Women and the Subversion of the Community' (1971)," https://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/357k/HMCDallaCostaSelfvalorizationTable.pdf.
28. 28 Federici, *Wages against Housework*; Dalla Costa and James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*; Fortunati, *The Arcana of Reproduction*.
29. Cleaver, "Self-Valorization"; Ferguson, *Women and Work*, Ch. 8; Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (Vintage Books, 1983), Ch. 13; Nadasen, *Care*, Ch. 1.
30. 30 As Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese point out in their analysis of "radical care," "the process of extending self-care outward and building a collective capacity for substantive political change requires hard work. So often this work is performed below the line, ignored by the media or narratives about political leaders and social change agents … we also notice who is uncared for, who receives care and who does not, and who is expected to perform care work, with or without pay." Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, "Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times," *Social Text*, 38, no. 1 (2020): 8.
31. Mónica A. Jiménez, "Searching for Monse," *Radical History Review*, no. 148 (2024); Emily Hobson, "The AIDS Quilt in Prison: Care Work in and against the Carceral State," *Radical History Review*, no. 148 (2024); Rachel Leah Klein, "Surviving domestic and state violence: Women's Prison Organizing and the Gendered Politics of Solidarity," *Gender & History* 36, no. 3 (2024); Emily L. Thuma and Joseph Hankins, "Caring Collectively: Twenty-Five Years of Abolition Feminism in California," in *Abolition Feminisms, Volume 1*, edited by Alisa Bierria et al. (Haymarket Books, 2022). With the exception of Jiménez who only uses "care," all invoke some combination of care and care work/labor.
32. Heather Berg, "'Today Solidarity Means, Fight Back:' On Militant Care," *Essays in Philosophy* 24, no.1–2 (2023): 27.
33. Victoria Law, Afterword to "Caring Collectively," 57.
34. Research has shown that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to be criminalized themselves. Once children are in foster care — an outcome five times more likely when women are incarcerated as opposed to men — they are far more vulnerable to the juvenile justice system. This is especially true for Black children. For these and other reasons, scholar and activist Dorothy Roberts calls child welfare services a "family policing system." See Eli Hager and Anna Flagg, *How Incarcerated Parents Are Losing their Children Forever* (The Marshall Project, 2018); Dorothy E. Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (Basic Books, 2002); and Dorothy E. Roberts, *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families — And How Abolition Can Build a Safer World* (Basic Books, 2022).
35. Gilmore, Golden Gulag, 71. In addition to scholarship cited in the prior footnote, on the criminalization of the poor see Kaaryn Gustafson, *Cheating Welfare: Public Assistance and the Criminalization of Poverty* (New York University Press, 2011).
36. Bierria, Caruthers, and Lober, *Abolition Feminisms Volume 1*, 11; Ferguson, Women and Work, 119.
37. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 68.
38. Dorothy Zietz, "Child Welfare Counseling Project, California Institution for Women, Corona, California," 1960, Folder "Projects and Programs — Children of Women Prisoners F3717:573," Projects and Programs Central Files, 1945-1962, Department of Corrections Records, California State Archives; Serapio R. Zalba, *Women Prisoners and Their Families: A Monograph on a Study of the Relationships of a Correctional Institution and Social Agencies Working with Incarcerated Women and Their Children* (Delmar, 1965).
39. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 68.
40. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 69.
41. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 70.
42. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 71.
43. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 234, n. 36.
44. It was also an acknowledgement of feminist scholarship that has reframed adoption as coercive rather than benevolent. For a sweeping history of the theft of children in the US see Laura Briggs, *Taking Children: A History of American Terror* (UC Press, 2021).
45. See especially Khalil Muhammed, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Harvard University Press, 2011) and Haley, *No Mercy Here*.
46. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 71-72.
47. Quote is a reference to the title of Roberts' most recent book on the family policing system, *Torn Apart*. Incarceration in jail and the economic barrier to posting bail is a huge factor in permanently separating poor Black queer women from their children. See also Aleks Kajstura and Wendy Sawyer, "Women's Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2024," *Prison Policy Initiative*, March 5, 2024, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024women.html.
48. Luk, "Ourselves at Stake," 234.
49. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 59.
50. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 59. For a fuller discussion of the rebellion that draws on multiple reports see 58-61.
51. For a more thorough discussion of the advocacy that followed the Christmas riot at CIW, see Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 75-81.
52. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 82.
53. For a fuller discussion of Prison MATCH's development and trajectory, see Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 81-88.
54. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 86.
55. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 86-87.
56. Gilmore, Ruth Wilson, and Léopold Lambert, "Making Abolition Geography in California's Central Valley with Ruth Wilson Gilmore," *The Funambulist*, January-February, 2019.
57. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 87.
58. Dorothy Zietz, "Child Welfare Counseling Project, California Institution for Women, Corona, California"; Serapio R. Zalba, *Women Prisoners and Their Families*.
59. Corey G. Johnson, "Female Inmates Sterilized in California Prisons without Approval," *Reveal*, July 7, 2013, https://revealnews.org/article/female-inmates-sterilized-in-california-prisons-without-approval/.
60. Shilpa Jindia, "Belly of the Beast: California's Dark History of Forced Sterilizations," *The Guardian*, July 30, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/30/

california-prisons-forced-sterilizations-belly-beast.

61. Ocen and Oparah, “Embodied Abolition,” 251-252.

62. Shefali Luthra, “California Promised Reparations to Survivors of Forced Sterilization. Few People Have Gotten Them,” *The 19th News*, September 5, 2023, https://19thnews.org/2023/09/california-forced-sterilization-incarceration-reparations/.

63. California Coalition for Women Prisoners, “Reproductive Justice x Abolition,” https://womenprisoners.org/rj-abolition/.

64. Sam Levin, “A Prison Guard Confessed to Sexual Misconduct. He Got a Year of Paid Time Off and No Charges,” *The Guardian*, October 30, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/oct/30/california-womens-prisons-correctional-officers-sexual-assault-investigation; Michael Balsamo and Michael R. Sisak, “AP Investigation: Women’s Prison Fostered Culture of Abuse,” *Associated Press*, February 6, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-california-united-states-prisons-00a711766f5f3d2bd3fe6402af1e0ff8.

65. Michael R. Sisak, Michael Balsamo and Christopher Weber, “Bureau of Prisons to Close California Women’s Prison where Inmates Have Been Subjected to Sex Abuse,” *Associated Press*, April 15, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/federal-prison-dublin-california-sexual-abuse-bureau-of-prisons 17731ecb5d0a14adf6011e853bf7e05d.

66. Balsamo and Sisak “AP Investigation”; Michael R. Sisak and Michael Balsamo, “Ex-prison Warden Convicted of Sexually Abusing Inmates,” *Associated Press*, December 8, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/prisons-california-sexual-abuse-us-federal-bureau-of-investigation-93a168903fbeaed61f72fb9088e02dd4; Michael R. Sisak and Michael Balsamo, “Chaplain who Sexually Abused Inmates Gets 7 Years in Prison,” *Associated Press*, August 31, 2022. https://apnews.com/article/us-prisons-chaplain-abused-inmates-dfd76afcae114b3ef8430bb4eff05ce8.

67. Sam Levin, “A Prison Guard Confessed.”

68. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 85; Sexual Abuse Response and Prevention Working Group, “CA Women’s Prisons: Sexual Abuse Response and Prevention Working Group, Community Report to the Legislature,” March 2024, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/swactionfund/pages/342/attachments/original/1709747546/CA_Women%E2%80%99s_Prisons_%E2%80%94_Sexual_Abuse_Response_and_Prevention_Working_Group.pdf?1709747546.

69. For example, the first recommendation of the sexual abuse response and prevention working group, comprised of numerous feminist abolition groups based in California, was expedited release for all survivors of sexual abuse at the hands of corrections staff. Sexual Abuse Response and Prevention Working Group, “CA Women’s Prisons,” 6. Responding to the BOP’s decision to shut down FCI Dublin, an incarcerated women who is also a whistleblower told reporters, “What the women have gone through at this facility, the abuse they suffered, that was punishment. They’re all low security. Send them home.” Sisak, Michael Balsamo and Weber, “Bureau of Prisons to close California women’s prison where inmates have been subjected to sex abuse.”

70. Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*, 83, 90.

71. Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor, “The Rise of End Times Fascism,” *The Guardian* April 13, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2025/apr/13/end-times-fascism-far-right-trump-musk.

72. Cleaver, “Self-Valorization.”

Our Bodies, Their Currency: Parenthood and Survival in Texas's Carceral System

KWANETA HARRIS

The following piece is both a condemnation and a call to action — a raw testimony that exposes how sexual extortion operates as official policy disguised as individual corruption. I write this as someone who has witnessed the calculated cruelty firsthand, who has seen guards weaponize parole reviews and disciplinary cases to coerce sexual favors from mothers desperate to return home. This isn't about isolated incidents of abuse. This is about a systematic architecture of control that transforms reproductive healthcare into punishment, menstruation into leverage, and maternal love into vulnerability. My goal is to connect the dots between reproductive oppression inside prison walls and the broader assault on bodily autonomy happening across Texas and beyond. The same forces restricting abortion access, criminalizing pregnancy outcomes, and surveilling Black and Brown bodies operate both inside and outside of prisons. The methods change, but the mission remains constant — control. I hope this piece illuminates for readers how reproductive justice cannot be separated from prison abolition. Every discussion about bodily autonomy must include those of us behind bars, because our experiences reveal the blueprint for broader reproductive control. This is my resistance — bearing witness to our survival and refusing to let society ignore how incarceration weaponizes our bodies against us. We will not be conquered, and our stories will not be silenced. They don't tell you that your body becomes currency in prison. That your dignity has an exchange rate where freedom is the prize and those holding the keys know exactly how to manipulate a parent's desperation to see their children again.

They call Texas the "prison rape capital of the world" for a reason.[1] The *Austin-American Statesman* didn't make up that title, they just put words to what people of all genders experience in these facilities. In Texas more facilities are deemed high-risk for sexual abuse than in any other state, and that's just what gets reported.

The first time I realized my body no longer belonged to me wasn't when they put handcuffs on me or when they issued me my prison whites. It was a few weeks into my sentence, when I heard a wounded animal wail, followed by people rushing to console the grieving one. Let's call her Lisa. Later, I heard whispers that Lisa was at risk of losing her children to the family policing system, Child "Protective" Services (CPS). After continuously seeing Lisa exit the utility closets with guards, I naively asked, "what's going on?" Another guard crystallized the picture, saying those guards were "helping with her upcoming parole review. Lots of

folks get disciplinary cases right before their board date. Shame if that happened to Lisa," he said and winked at me. Here in Texas prisons these types of incidents aren't isolated. They're part of a calculated system of control. Guards know which incarcerated people have children, which ones are desperate to get home, which ones can't afford another parole denial. They use this information like ammunition. If they write enough bogus disciplinary cases, your five-year parole eligibility becomes seven, becomes ten. Your children grow up without you, becoming strangers. So when guards offer their "help" in exchange for sexual favors, many feel they have no choice. There are a few incarcerated individuals who do choose to serve their full sentences rather than submit to this sexual extortion. I've seen folks sacrifice years of freedom, watching their children grow up in photos rather than play this degrading game. But for many of us, especially single parents, that's not an option. When your babies are in the system, when they're hurting and need their parent home, you do what you have to do.

"Guards know which incarcerated people have children, which ones are desperate to get home, which ones can't afford another parole denial. They use this information like ammunition.

THE SILENT SACRIFICES

The indignity of reproductive healthcare here breaks you down piece by piece. When we complain about the lack of toilet paper we're told, "Equal Rights! You get seven rolls a month like men's prisons!" ignoring that people with vaginas require toilet paper each time they use the restroom. We can't just shake dry. We menstruate and require more supplies. The lack of supplies combined with forced unpaid labor means we sometimes use socks as toilet paper and exchange soiled pads for clean ones like we're living in medieval times.

Complaining is usually awarded with retaliation. Want a mammogram? Get ready to wait at least a year. Need a pap smear? If you live in certain areas, you'll have a male guard standing behind a screen listening to every detail to parrot to everyone within earshot. "How many STIs? How many abortions?" the doctors bark, never asking about our pregnancy complications or medical history, just counting what they see as moral failures. According to a 2021 study by the Prison Policy Initiative, approximately six out of ten incarcerated women in jail have had at least one pregnancy terminated. Many of us are survivors of sexual violence; a Vera Institute of Justice and the Safety and Justice Challenge report found that 86 percent of women have experienced sexual violence before incarceration.[2] These intrusive exams retraumatize us all over again. No wonder many avoid the infirmary, preferring to ask family to send reproductive health books and printouts from Dr. Google.

But they are denied for "encouraging deviant behavior" and/or containing "sexually explicit images." We're even denied the state-issued, illustrated tampon insertion instructions for this reason. When friends are issued disciplinary cases for self-mutilation, the charge isn't self-harm or even a mental health evaluation — it is "destruction of state property." The same charge as ripping a bed sheet. That is how literally they mean it when they say we belong to them. The message is clear: your body isn't yours anymore.

WEAPONIZED FAITH AND TARGETED CONTROL

The forced Christianity adds another layer of control. Mandatory faith-based programs shame queer and transgender people, telling them their "lifestyle choices" are why they're here. Staff issue disciplinary infractions accompanied by lies that LGBTQIA+ people must register as sex offenders upon release for consensual same-sex activity like holding hands, embracing, and intimately showering together. The church sermons center submission and acceptance of our "place" based on gender. Project 2025 rhetoric has become increasingly common, promoting biblically based traditional values where people who are transgender and single parents don't exist. According to the Williams Institute, incarcerated people are three times more likely to identify as LGBTQIA+ than the general population, making this targeted discrimination even more devastating.[3] It's no coincidence that many of the halfway houses we're forced into after release are run by these same religious organizations preaching a return to yesterday.

When the Department of Justice (DOJ) released their report on Julia Tutwiler prison in Alabama in 2014, it documented how guards

sexually assaulted and impregnated incarcerated women, forcing them to carry and deliver their rapists' babies.[4] The findings revealed a pattern of abuse dating back two decades with over 230 cases of sexual misconduct. It read like a page from our story. The DOJ describes Tutwiler as a "toxic sexualized environment," a bug in the system. But it's not just Alabama. FCI Dublin in California earned the nickname "Rape Club" before a 2024 $116 million-dollar landmark settlement for 103 incarcerated people who suffered sexual abuse at the hands of the warden, chaplain, and multiple federal corrections officers.[5] FCI Carswell in Texas faces ongoing complaints of abuse targeting medically vulnerable people.[6] In reality, the bug is a feature in every women's prison that everyone is eager to ignore.

BODILY AUTONOMY DENIED

Unlike Tutweiler, we can access birth control, but it's not used primarily as a contraceptive. Many use Depo Provera for the side effect of stopping their periods despite the medication being subject to a class-action lawsuit for links to intracranial bleeding. The state doesn't provide enough menstrual supplies. Predatory guards know this, so they weaponize our basic biological function. "Need some extra pads this month? Maybe we can work something out," guards say. A 2019 ACLU report documented multiple cases of guards withholding menstrual supplies for sexual favors across several states.[7] The lack of access to hygiene items leads people to create DIY tampons from pads, risking Toxic Shock Syndrome and infection. The medical fees are designed to discourage us from seeking care. This results in things like a simple vaginal infection becoming a serious condition because we can't afford treatment. Add the medical staff's complicity with anti-LGBTQIA+ tactics by grilling folks about having sex with another incarcerated person. The medical staff lies and says, "This is the only way to get a yeast infection." Once they coerce a confession of being in a same-sex relationship, the guard issues a Code 20.3 which prohibits consensual sexual acts between incarcerated people. This impacts transgender and nonbinary people particularly harshly, as their healthcare needs are routinely dismissed, denied, or used as leverage for abuse.

The exploitation doesn't end with release. If anything, it intensifies under mandatory supervision. Your parole, probation, or bail officer, almost always male, has complete control over your freedom. One bad report and you're back inside. They know this power and some abuse it mercilessly. Then, there are the job supervisors who discover you're on parole. "Your parole officer needs monthly employment verification," they'll say, closing their office door. It's déjà vu: submit or lose your job, violate parole, and return to prison.

If an unintended pregnancy occurs, people on probation, bond, or parole can't travel out of state for abortion care with an electronic shackle tracking every medical appointment that must be explained and approved. The recent wave of pro-life legislation, such as Texas Senate Bill 8 and House Bill 1280, effectively bans abortion after six weeks and criminalizes the procedure entirely, with no exceptions for rape or incest. These laws disproportionately impact people already under surveillance because our movements, communications, and medical appointments require approval and documentation. Recently, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has moved to criminalize those providing assistance to people seeking abortions: whether driving them to appointments, providing childcare while they're at the doctor, or providing financial assistance. For the hypersurveilled, these restrictions make accessing reproductive healthcare nearly impossible without risking reincarceration.

The parallels between reproductive control inside and outside prison walls are striking. Inside, our mail is censored; our bodies surveilled, punished, and weaponized; and our healthcare and hygiene items rationed. Outside, people in Texas currently face increasing restrictions on bodily autonomy with forced ultrasounds, censored communications, ever-changing laws, and no state access to abortion care. The methods might differ, but the goal remains the same: control over people's bodies, particularly Black and marginalized bodies of all genders.

"The parallels between reproductive control inside and outside prison walls are striking. . . . The methods might differ, but the goal remains the same.

Sadly, the reality is that for many incarcerated folks, especially Black women and transgender individuals, reproductive justice isn't just about choice. It's about survival when you reside in a state with the highest uninsured rate and leader in Black maternal mortality. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, Black women in the United States are three times as likely to die from pregnancy-related causes compared to white women.[8] Forced childbirth becomes a potential death sentence, whether you're behind prison walls or navigating parole, bond, or probation.

RESISTANCE IS SURVIVAL

We will not be conquered. We resist. We resist in ways big and small. We share torn-out magazine pages with basic health information. We have a whisper network and hand signals to warn each other about predatory staff. We draw diagrams of our anatomy on cell walls to teach how our bodies work. We steal medication from the infirmary. We are nonjudgmental of those who are targeted with sexual intimidation, whether they submit or refuse. Both are victims. We build mutual aid networks across the fence to help friends outside access reproductive healthcare by providing our safe family addresses to mail "prohibited" medication. We document, and we support one another.

We will continue to resist until society acknowledges that forcing people to choose between sexual exploitation versus abandoning their children isn't justice. It is state-sanctioned assault. We resist, and — in a system designed to strip us of our dignity and autonomy — we find small ways to preserve both.

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POSTER ART BY JESS X. SNOW FROM THE SERIES *(OUR LOVE IS) UNBROKEN BY BARS*, CURATED BY KATIE FULLER AND SUPPORTED BY AMPLIFIER ART. PHOTOGRAPH BY KATIE FULLER. 2017.

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Reproductive Genocide, Disabling Futures, and Carcerality in Gaza

BAYAN ABUSNEINEH

On August 13, 2024, Mohammed Mahdi Al-Qumsan was walking back from registering his newborn twins at a local government office in Gaza when he received a call informing him that an Israeli artillery strike had hit his home, killing his wife Jumana and their four-day-old twins: Aysal and Ayser.[1] What was supposed to be a celebratory moment and a glimpse of hope turned into a nightmare for Mohammed. Just the day before, his wife announced on social media the arrival of their twins from a difficult cesarean, informing her relatives who were overjoyed with the news that she and the babies were safe and healthy. Four days later, the same post was filled with condolences and sympathies for her and her children's passing. Jumana's mother was also killed in the airstrike. In a video, Mohammed holds his twin's newly printed birth certificates, with his hands shaking: "Here is their date of birth. August 10 . . . They're dead."[2]

Aysal and Ayser are among at least 2,100 babies and toddlers killed by the Israeli army in the Gaza Strip as of August 2024.[3] Since October 2023, Israel has engaged in aerial and ground bombardment against the Gaza Strip, killing over 52,000 Palestinians, decimating over 80 percent of housing and other infrastructure, and displacing more than 95 percent of the population.[4] Al-Qumsan's family was displaced multiple times, beginning with the al-Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City in early October to the Shaboura refugee camp in Rafah, and later, to Deir al-Balah in Central Gaza, a place that Israel marked as a safe zone. There Israel struck his apartment building, killing his entire family.

On August 4, 2025, the Gaza Health Ministry released a new list containing the personal information of over sixty thousand Palestinians killed in the last twenty-one months in the enclave. The list includes over 19,000 children's names; the first twenty-seven pages of this seemingly endless list are listed as zero, or under one year old.[5] The devastating violence and rising death toll led United Nations Special Rapporteur on Palestine Francesca Albanese to declare that "It is not a 'war.' It is a genocide . . . The intent to destroy is evident and unequivocal."[6]

As I finish writing this piece in August of 2025, Israel wages a campaign of mass starvation alongside relentless bombardment of Gaza, approaching two years of uninterrupted assault. The official death toll surpasses sixty thousand Palestinians, though experts warn the true number is likely at least three or four times higher.[7] As a Palestinian American scholar, activist, and mother, I find myself unprepared for the unceasing livestream of burned, mutilated, and emaciated bodies — a spectacle of death that saturates every moment.

Palestinians continue, at unimaginable risk, to document the unendurable: parents forced to weigh their children's remains in grocery bags, silhouettes of bodies engulfed in flames, some still tethered to IV drips, children's emaciated frames after months of imposed starvation, newborns decomposing in powerless incubators; neighborhoods completely flattened, mass graves where entire families are buried together overnight, amputated limbs scattered among the rubble. And all of this has been made possible through the material aid and political sanction of the United States government. These images, these realities are unbearable, yet they testify to the persistence of life-telling in the face of annihilation.

For more than twenty-two months, Israel's aggression against the Gaza Strip has made the task of writing this paper nearly impossible. My sources arrive in fragments, often in real-time videos, Instagram posts, fleeting news articles, hurried reports —

each one shifting as events unfold, each one pressing into the archive of a genocide still in motion. To write under these conditions, as a Palestinian mother, is to be torn between the unbearable weight of grief and the urgent insistence to bear witness. It is difficult beyond words, and yet necessary — because all of Gaza's children are my children, just as all the world's children are my children. To refuse silence is to claim them, to insist on their lives against a world organized to erase them.

As I argue in this essay, this violence constitutes "reproductive genocide." Reproductive genocide is not only about the destruction of Palestinian life in the present but about the systematic assault on the very possibility of Palestinian futurity. The deliberate starvation of children, the bombing of maternity wards, the killing of entire families together, and the denial of even the smallest protections of childhood innocence are all reproductive strategies of elimination. To call this reproductive genocide is to name how Gaza is targeted precisely through its capacity to reproduce life, kinship, and generations. To stand with Gaza, then, is to affirm that Palestinian reproductive futurity — our children, our generations, our survival — is a radical practice of freedom against a world organized to erase it.

Under international law, genocide is defined as any act committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, "a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group," as noted in the December 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[8] Israeli politicians proudly revealed this intent shortly after the Hamas attacks on October 7. On October 9, Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant declared: "We are imposing a complete siege on Gaza: no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel. Everything is closed. We are fighting human animals, and we will act accordingly."[9]

The UN Genocide Convention lists five acts that fall under its definition of genocide: "1) killing members of the group, 2) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, 3) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, 4) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and 5) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."[10] While guilty of all five of these acts, the fourth — "imposing measures intended to prevent births" — is what explicitly ties into what the Palestinian Feminist Collective has called "reproductive genocide."[11] This turn towards reproductive genocide illuminates but one thread in the vast and interwoven tapestry that constitutes genocide.

This essay proceeds in four parts, each tracing how reproductive genocide systematically forecloses Palestinian generationality. I begin with a theoretical framing of reproductive genocide, arguing that it must be understood as constitutive of carceral logics rather than as a secondary effect. I then turn to the historical context of Gaza and the blockade, situating the present genocide within decades of siege, occupation, and settler colonial elimination. The subsequent sections develop the framing and analysis of reproductive genocide through three current forms of targeted carceral violence in Gaza: first, obstetric and maternal violence, which severs the possibility of birth and safe reproduction; second, the infrastructural assaults on homes, hospitals, and the means of sustaining life hindering social reproduction; and third, through the targeted destruction and maiming of Palestinian children founded in the denial of their innocence as embodiments of the futurity of Palestinian life. Lastly, I conclude by reflecting on the implications of these practices for abolitionist feminism, arguing that Gaza — and Palestine more broadly — must be understood as a critical site where the struggle against reproductive genocide is inseparable from practices of life affirmation and freedom.

REPRODUCTIVE GENOCIDE AND CARCERALITY

The Palestinian Feminist Collective defines reproductive genocide as "the policies, discourses, and practices that delimit, restrict, target, or diminish the life-giving capacities, choices, access, and life chances of communities made vulnerable by systemic military violence and occupation, besiegement, settler colonialism, and/or imperial warfare."[12] It includes "mass incarceration, psychological warfare, collective punishment, ethnic cleansing, gendered and sexual violence by an occupying state or force, forced conditions of unlivability, and the imprisonment and bodily desecration for the living and the dead."[13] In other words, it encompasses a wide range of strategies that lead to the systematic destruction of a people through targeted attacks on their ability to reproduce, sustain themselves, and create and maintain future generations.

Importantly, reproductive genocide is not separate from genocide; rather, it is a recognized tactic within the broader legal and conceptual definition of genocide. It is a structural means to achieve the goal

of destroying a group, especially when direct killing is not the sole or primary method being used.[14] This moment in the reproductive genocide against Palestinians is not an isolated moment or an escalation of Israeli violence, but a culmination of Israel's settler colonialism long predicated on the dispossession and erasure of the Palestinian people. Reproductive genocide thus illuminates how Israel's recent aggression against Palestine and its people is part of a long-standing Zionist project of erasure of Palestinian life, generationality, and futurity.

Reproductive genocide builds on the framework and legacy of the movement of reproductive justice. The reproductive justice framework advocates for four core human rights values: the right to have children; the right to choose not to have children; the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments; and the right to bodily autonomy for individuals, families, and communities.[15] The term reproductive justice was coined in 1994 by a group of twelve Black women in Chicago (who later became the Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice) to center the reproductive experiences of Black and other marginalized communities. This movement emerged in the context of other shifts in anti-racist, anti-fascist, anti-colonial, and feminist politics worldwide in the early 1990s, including the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the fall of the South African apartheid regime. Some of these women later formed the group SisterSong, which includes members from Asian American, Latina, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, and white communities to expand and improve the reproductive justice framework through organizing, scholarship, and the development of a new language to engage issues within the United States and beyond its borders.[16]

Reproductive genocide also expands on reproductive oppression — "the regulation and exploitation of individuals' bodies, sexuality, labor, and procreative capacities as a strategy to control individuals and entire communities."[17] Reproductive oppression is genocide, or "reprocide," as Loretta J. Ross terms it. With reprocide, the colonized population's reproductive bodies are curtailed, contained, and disdained. The goal becomes to destroy a group, especially when direct killing is not the sole or primary method being used.[18] For instance, the racial construction of Black communities as biologically inferior and "unfit" for motherhood, reinforced by the eugenics movement that dominated the United States in the 20th century, led to widespread use of forced sterilization.[19] The settler colonial logics of elimination have historically intertwined with eugenics practices to produce reprocide against Indigenous peoples and Black communities, manifesting through forced sterilizations, family separations, and carceral control. In the case of Palestine, Israel's reproductive genocide is produced and justified through settler colonialism, whereby Indigenous populations are eliminated (through removal or extermination) so that they can be replaced by settlers who become the "new natives."[20]

"Reproductive genocide and carcerality converge as mutually reinforcing mechanisms of elimination where the regulation of birth, life, and kinship is inseparable from the prison-like conditions imposed on an entire population.

Historically, Israel has targeted Palestinian women's bodies and reproductive capacities to make way for the growth of the Jewish state — a strategy to expropriate Palestinian land. Because Palestinian women are constructed as biological producers of future generations, they pose a demographic threat to the state. Thus, as Jewish reproduction is nurtured and encouraged on a nationalist level, Palestinian reproduction is pathologized and contained. Israel's genocidal acts extend beyond immediate physical destruction, impacting the "deeply personal realms of health, bodily autonomy and dignity, affecting every aspect of Palestinian life" and, crucially, future generations.[21] Israel's current onslaught against Gaza and the West Bank relies on the precision of military and carceral technologies that produce and justify the eugenic language of cleansing, displacement, and elimination of the population to advance Israel's settler colonial project.

Reproductive genocide in Gaza and Palestine thus cannot be disentangled from the carceral logics that structure Palestinian life under siege. An abolitionist feminist lens reveals that reproductive genocide is not an aberration but a predictable outcome of carceral settler colonialism. The blockade functions as a vast carceral

apparatus, confining over two million Palestinians in conditions of deprivation where food, medicine, and reproductive health care are deliberately obstructed. This enclosure transforms Gaza into what scholars started to describe as the world's largest "open-air prison," where Palestinian bodies are subjected to state violence that forecloses the possibility of safe reproduction, child-rearing, and intergenerational continuity, and where broader technologies of control criminalize survival, render movement impossible, and reduce reproduction itself to a site of state regulation and destruction.[22] As geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore emphasizes, carceral power extends beyond prison walls; it is a spatial strategy of control that immobilizes and contains populations deemed disposable by racial and colonial regimes.[23] In Gaza, this manifests in the form of a permanent siege, restricted mobility, military assaults, and infrastructural collapse — all of which coalesce to produce death and curtail life at its reproductive core. Children are born into captivity, maternity wards are bombed, and mass killings and displacement disrupt family continuity. Reproductive genocide and carcerality converge as mutually reinforcing mechanisms of elimination where the regulation of birth, life, and kinship is inseparable from the prison-like conditions imposed on an entire population.

Moreover, reproductive genocide centers social reproduction as both the biological reproduction of life and its social aspects, such as the labor, care, and infrastructure necessary to support and sustain human existence.[24] This framework contributes to expanding discourses of reproduction that contribute to larger structures of racism, nation-building, and imperial expansion, following the tenets of reproductive justice. Israel's ongoing project in Gaza renders Palestinians disposable — through exposing them to premature death, denying them the infrastructure of life, and making intergenerational survival impossible. These become not collateral effects of war but deliberate strategies of elimination. To destroy the ability to reproduce is to eliminate a people's very existence.[25] The carceral state does not simply punish: it fractures families, denies healthcare, and suppresses the conditions necessary to create and sustain life. As genocide makes clear, reproductive justice, then, cannot be separated from carceral abolition.

Feminist scholars have long drawn attention to how women's bodies, as "biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities," function as symbols of the nation and its borders in various contexts.[26] M. Murphy emphasizes how reproductive capacities are unevenly produced, managed, and constrained across space, populations, and infrastructures. Global systems such as colonialism, capitalism, racism, and environmental degradation contribute to the distribution of "life chances, pasts, and futures."[27] To Murphy, social infrastructures — including state, military, chemical, agricultural, and economic — reveal how some aspects of life are supported while others are abandoned. Indeed, they argue, these apparatuses can "'assist,' alter, rearrange, foreclose, harm, and participate in the process of creating, maintaining, averting, and transforming life in intergenerational time."[28] We can extend this understanding to highlight how reproductive genocide names a form of genocide that is systemic, infrastructural, and slow. As a framework of political analysis, it asks us to understand genocide not only in terms of death, but in the organized obstruction of life and futurity.

Racism, or "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death," as Gilmore defines it, is central to this logic of reproductive genocide in Palestine.[29] Israeli politicians have referred to Palestinians as "human animals," making Gaza a "slaughterhouse," with plans of "erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth."[30] Israeli Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu, from the far-right Jewish Power party, suggested that Israel drop a nuclear bomb on Gaza, claiming that there were "no uninvolved civilians" in the territory.[31] Systemic dehumanization occurs through racializing and criminalizing Palestinians as Hamas supporters, militants, and antisemitic. This process is further reinforced in the media through the underreporting of Palestinian deaths, accusing Palestinians of being human shields, and marginalizing Palestinian voices. This is not only manifested in the large number of Palestinians killed because of both direct and indirect methods, including airstrikes, inadequate medical treatment, and starvation, but also in the destruction of essential spaces of reproduction — such as hospitals, homes, and reproductive health centers — all of which contribute to the systematic risk of early death.

Judith Butler's concept of "un/grievability," the idea that not all lives are equally recognized as lives worth mourning, illuminates the conditions under which Palestinian death is rendered permissible in Gaza.[32] Within Israeli settler colonial and imperial contexts, Palestinian children, families, and communities are constructed as

threats, thereby stripping them of innocence and denying them the protections typically afforded under international law. This differential allocation of grievability ensures that Palestinian deaths are not only tolerated but rationalized as necessary to secure the settler state. It explains why unsupported reports of mass rape and Biden's false claim to have seen "forty beheaded Jewish babies" circulated widely, legitimizing massive assaults on Gaza.[33] Such narratives were immediately grievable, mobilized to demand retribution and justified an extreme and immediate military siege. At the same time, the lives of Palestinians killed were dehumanized, cast as legitimate targets, and unworthy of grief. Thus, reproductive genocide is sustained not only through material practices of blockade, bombardment, and starvation, but also through this ideological regime in which Palestinian life is structurally positioned as ungrievable, foreclosing the possibility of collective mourning and, by extension, of reproductive futurity.[34] This ungrievability of Palestinian life must be situated within a longer historical trajectory in which the blockade has functioned as a sustained structure of carceral containment and reproductive control. Tracing this history not only situates present atrocities within the settler colonial project of elimination but also reveals how the infrastructures of deprivation — restricted movement, economic strangulation, and repeated military assaults — have long worked to erode Palestinian life and futurity.

GAZA: CATASTROPHE, THE ONGOING NAKBA

Gaza is home to approximately 2.3 million people, occupying 365 square kilometers of land. For the past seventeen years, Israel has imposed a siege on Gaza in which Israel controls anything coming in and out of Gaza from air, land, and sea. As a result, Gaza relies primarily on international aid for food, water, medical supplies, and other essential goods. Living conditions are severely regulated and penalized by Israel's control of the borders.[35] Palestinians are not allowed to enter and leave Gaza freely, including to enter the West Bank or Israel. Palestinians in Gaza must apply for permits to exit Gaza for medical attention, which are often denied. Those with a severe medical illness, such as cancer, face a death sentence. This full-trade blockade is a weapon of economic warfare designed to paralyze Gaza's economy and create immense poverty. The closure of Gaza has devastated Gaza's economy and fragmented the Palestinian people, as well as exacerbated restrictions on essential gynecological care access and heightened vulnerability to forms of gender-based violence for women and girls, as I demonstrate in the first section on obstetric and reproductive violence.[36]

Over 80 percent of Gaza's inhabitants are Palestinian refugees from the Nakba, the Arabic word for "catastrophe," referring to the start of a mass expulsion campaign in 1948 to ethnically cleanse Palestinians and create a new State of Israel in historic Palestine. Zionist militias and early Jewish settlers displaced over 750,000 Palestinians after months of systematically cleansing them from their towns, villages, and cities through mass murder, sexual violence, and widespread land theft. To justify the violence, Zionist ideology constructed Palestine as a contradictory, underdeveloped, and empty land awaiting the "return" and settlement of Jewish people.[37]

Before 1948, Gaza was a large and wealthy territory within Mandatory Palestine, an attractive site for colonial powers due to its coastal location and fertile land. After the declaration of the Israeli state in 1948, Egypt subsumed power over Gaza, forcing over 170,000 Palestinians to a tiny strip of land known today as the Gaza Strip. After the 1967 war between Israel, Syria, Egypt, and Jordan, Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, placing the territories under military rule. Israel withdrew its forces and settlements in Gaza in 2005 and called for disengagement. Yet after Hamas won the 2006 democratic elections in a surprise victory, Israel imposed a blockade on the strip, from land, sea, and air, as a form of collective punishment.

Despite the withdrawal of the settlements, the occupation did not end but merely took a crueler form: "The jailer pulled out of the jail and was now holding its prisoners captive from without. Yes, Gaza was and still is the largest prison on earth, a gruesome experiment performed on human beings."[38] As a result of the siege, Gaza is susceptible to repeated cases of genocidal violence. This most recent escalation of violence, dubbed Operation Swords of Iron by the state of Israel, is Gaza's sixth major war since 2008. Palestinians remind us that "catastrophe is not in the future; the Nakba is not in the past."[39] The current project of starvation, murder, displacement, and — as I am arguing — reproductive violence is part of this ongoing Nakba or reproductive genocide. Israeli politicians do not shy away from explicitly stating their intention to cleanse

Gaza ethnically. As one puts it: "We are now rolling out the Gaza Nakba . . . Gaza Nakba 2023. That's how it'll end."[40]

Part and parcel of the ongoing Nakba is the systematic targeting of Palestinian women's bodies, sexuality, and reproduction.[41] The targeting of Palestinian women's bodies has long functioned as a colonial and political tactic linked to land annexation and territorial expansion.[42] Since the goal of settler colonialism is to replace the native population with the settler one, control over Palestinian reproduction is not incidental but is central to the Zionist mission. Palestinian women are conceived of as the biological and cultural producers of future generations; thus, it is no coincidence that their bodies become sites of control and violence.[43] Since 1948, Israel has sought to create a Jewish population majority through two means. Firstly, through the Law of Return, which automatically granted every Jewish person in the world the right to Israeli citizenship. This law also worked to deny citizenship rights to Palestinian refugees, many of whom fled or were expelled during the Nakba, to make room for the Israeli state. Secondly, through policies instituted to encourage Jewish women to bear children for the nation. After the declaration of Israel in 1953, the first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion wrote that "the increase of Jewish birthrate is not an imperialist need, but rather an essential component of the survival of the [Jewish] people. . . . [A]ny woman who does not have four children as much as it depends on her is betraying the Jewish mission."[44] Meanwhile, Palestinians are characterized as an undesirable problem population whose fertility not only threatens Israel's national security but also threatens the growth of the Jewish-majority state.[45]

Anxieties about Palestinian reproduction, including fears about Palestinian population growth, are deeply embedded in the ideological and political narratives driving the current attacks on Gaza. These narratives are central to the justification rhetoric and strategy of Israeli state violence around reproductive concerns and autonomy. Their actions infringe on Palestinian women's reproductive autonomy, target essential infrastructure for destruction, and kill and maim Palestinian children.[46] As the next section demonstrates, this discursive pathologization of Palestinian births as "demographic threats" justifies the surveillance, policing, and military targeting of spaces occupied by women and families, such as maternity wards, shelters, and homes. These mechanisms, in other words, align with long-term settler colonial goals to eliminate the native population and maximize (to dispossess) Palestinian land.

OBSTETRIC, MATERNAL, AND REPRODUCTIVE VIOLENCE

During the first weeks of the post-October 7 attacks, Israeli army veteran Ezra Yachin declared: "We need to wipe their families, their mothers and their children. These animals must not be allowed to live any longer."[47] Women are facing a myriad of challenges related to sexual and reproductive health in Gaza, exacerbated by the siege and restricted access to medical treatment. The UN estimated that fifty thousand pregnant women lived in Gaza at the time of the initial siege in October of 2023, and close to 5,500 women gave birth each month (close to 183 women a day), 15 percent of whom were anticipated to require additional medical attention because of pregnancy or delivery-related problems.[48] Miscarriages in Gaza have skyrocketed more than 300 percent.[49] Malnutrition and a lack of prenatal supplements such as iron have made anemia deficiency endemic, increasing the risk of pre-term birth, low birth weight, and bleeding to death during labor. People who menstruate are infected at alarming rates due to Israel's blockade of water and basic supplies, and many resort to making their own pads and tampons. Some girls as young as thirteen have taken birth control pills to halt their periods. What is left of the hospitals that Israel has raided or completely bombed have run out of fuel, electricity, access to clean water, and anesthetics. As a result, pregnant people are forced to give birth in overcrowded healthcare facilities, shelters, their homes, or on the streets, increasing the risk of infection and medical complications.[50]

Alongside starvation and the imminent threat of death and disease, pregnant Palestinians in Gaza are forced to undergo caesarean sections without anesthesia.[51] Even after they have endured traumatic deliveries — like having seven layers of tissue cut with limited pain relief — they struggle to find baby formula, diapers, clean water, and sufficient food for breastfeeding. Breastfeeding mothers are advised to drink "at least three liters of water a day" and to eat well to produce enough milk, advice which has become increasingly impossible to follow as the siege continues.[52] Conditions at hospitals are so overburdened that women are being discharged one day after delivering, often making them susceptible to infections. The UN agency has cited a "nightmarish" case of one woman discharged just three hours after giving birth.[53] While the UN agency managed to deliver eight thousand post-birth kits to Gaza as of May 2025, this represents a small fraction of the actual need. Doctors are conducting

mass hysterectomies after childbirth — the removal of patients' uteruses — due to medical teams' inability to provide the proper resources necessary to stop their bleeding. Along with these horrifying conditions, women still face the threat of airstrikes at any time. A woman named Um Raed from Beit Hanoun reveals: "Since the birth, I've not known whether I should be focusing on my contractions or the sound of warplanes overhead. . . . You know, for such a young baby, he's learned to recognize the sounds of bombing."[54] This is a form of militarized birth, where Palestinians are forced to endure pregnancy, labor, and delivery under extreme forms of military surveillance. The intense fear and trauma of a potential bomb falling upon them or anxieties about where and how they will deliver in a space with limited resources, including a lack of pain medication, can lead to premature delivery, which increases the risk of death for both mother and child.[55]

Before October 7, over 94,000 women and girls already lacked access to sexual and reproductive health services; this number rose to more than one million just in the first five months of Israel's attack on Gaza.[56] The blockade previously imposed a burden on Palestinian women's reproductive health by restricting their movement inside Gaza, denying them access to specialized prenatal and postnatal health care outside of Gaza, and limiting food imports, leading to high rates of miscarriage and stillbirth. In 2008 and 2009, during Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli army produced and proudly wore a series of T-shirts calling for the execution of Palestinian children and pregnant people, and the sodomizing of Hamas leaders.[57] One of the shirts included an image of a pregnant woman in crosshairs with the slogan "One shot, two kills," written underneath, signifying that by targeting pregnant women they have eliminated two demographic threats to the Israeli state, the child and the mother, who is categorized as a vessel for territories.[58] This dual annihilation is not simply symbolic. On May 21, 2025, far-right Israeli politician Moshe Feiglin declared that "the enemy is not Hamas. . . . Every child in Gaza is the enemy. We need to occupy Gaza and settle it, and not a single Gazan child will be left there. There is no other victory."[59]

Gaza's carceral regime — created through the blockade, the militarization of the borders, and ongoing surveillance — impedes Palestinian women's access to reproductive health and autonomy. These conditions of reproductive harm are not a consequence of the war but rather the point of the war and blockade: to prevent any hope for Palestinian futurity. The Israeli state actively produces the conditions in which Palestinian reproduction is made precarious, dangerous, or impossible as a means of eliminating Palestinian life capacity. This not only denies Palestinian women their reproductive autonomy and survival under human rights but also establishes a form of reproductive governance that manages which lives are allowed to live and which must die.[60] But to recall Murphy, the notion of distributed reproduction helps us see that birth outcomes are not just automatic biological functions. Far from it: they rely on the infrastructures of and access to food systems, electricity, sewage, and mobility — all of which have been directly targeted, especially medical facilities.[61]

"Gaza's carceral regime — created through the blockade, the militarization of the borders, and ongoing surveillance — impedes Palestinian women's access to reproductive health and autonomy.

HOSPITALS AND HOMES HAVE BECOME BATTLEGROUNDS

The reproductive genocidal nature of the attacks on Gaza is not just documented in the growing number of deaths, and spaces and places bombed every day. Even so, body count is still essential, particularly in the intentional targeting of intimate spaces, reproductive life spaces, and survival spaces. Through both aerial and ground assaults, Israel has targeted homes, hospitals, ambulances, orphanages, playgrounds, schools, mosques, churches. The Israeli army cut off and targeted water lines, electricity, emergency services, and other crucial services.[62] In 2023 and 2024, Israel destroyed over 25 percent of bakeries in Gaza — in one incident, Israel killed over a hundred Palestinians and injured one thousand more, targeting people simply waiting in line to receive food at a local grocery store.[63] Even if Palestinians are not killed through aerial assault, the extent of destruction to property, institutions, and universities, as well as the militarization of homes, hospitals, and schools to produce "legitimate" targets are all part of a plan to make Gaza uninhabitable.

Within the past two years, Israel has destroyed over 90 percent

of housing units and 70 percent of all structures. The airstrikes against residential buildings — mainly carried out in the middle of the night — are designed to kill entire families.[64] Since October 2023, Israel has wiped out at least 2,200 families from the Palestine Civil Registry, completely erasing their bloodlines from existence.[65] More than 6,350 Palestinians have been killed in airstrikes that entirely destroyed households, while another 5,120 families have been reduced to a lone survivor—acts that amount to collective erasure of entire family lines. One family, the Abu Salem family, once spanning four generations, was obliterated with over 270 family members killed.[66] During one strike, pediatrician Dr. Alaa Al-Najjar lost nine of her ten children and her husband, while her only surviving son was left in critical condition.[67] Such indiscriminate killings have given rise to a new term in Gaza — 'WCNSF' (Wounded Child, No Surviving Family) — to capture the countless cases where entire households are erased, leaving behind traumatized orphans. This relentless violence reshapes family structures and the very capacity to parent.

More precisely, Israel is not simply concerned with killing individual lives but erasing collective lives, histories, futures, and memories — a genocidal method to erase Palestinians as an indigenous presence known as the "logic of elimination."[68] In the Palestinian context, home is far more than a private space; for Palestinians, home is a place of continuity and memory.[69] Families are transmitters of language, rituals, and land-based knowledge. Following the displacement of Palestinians after the Nakba, the Palestinian home became a political site — a space that "is the sphere of the private but is always already connected with the collective Palestinian history of the homeland."[70] The bombing of homes in Gaza is thus part of an intentional effort to erase intergenerational memory and resistance from the home — what Palestinian scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian calls the "archive of the home."[71] This targeted erasure has the intent and effects of erasing Palestinian families and legacies, reducing Palestinians' ability to reproduce themselves as a nation.

Targeting infrastructure in Gaza, especially healthcare, water, electricity, and sanitation systems, systematically destroys the conditions required for safe pregnancy, childbirth, and the survival of mothers and infants. Israeli bombings have crippled Gaza's water and sewage systems, which have led to high rates of waterborne diseases for all, including pregnant women and newborns, such as dehydration, sepsis, and high rates of infection. Moreover, Israel has shelled, besieged, and raided all of Gaza's medical infrastructure.[72] Israel targets medical facilities and their personnel, on the claim that Hamas uses them for militant activity. Despite the lack of evidence for this claim, Israel continues to wage war on all essential life-saving civilian infrastructure in Gaza.[73] Many hospitals served as sites of refuge and shelter for Palestinians whose homes had been destroyed. During their ground invasion of Al-Shifa hospital, one of Gaza's largest hospitals, the Israeli army raided, destroyed medical equipment and machinery, and demolished most of its buildings, including the emergency department and neonatal intensive care unit, rendering the hospital non-functional and severely limiting access to life-saving maternal and infant care. In the early months of the genocide, Israel also raided the Al-Nasr Children's Hospital in Northern Gaza, forcing medical personnel, patients, and hospital staff to evacuate as the military continued its ground invasion of northern Gaza. Amid heavy gunfire and shelling, staff concluded that they could not safely evacuate five premature babies in the NICU who were placed on oxygen machines.[74] The Israeli military had left them to decompose in their beds due to lack of oxygen.

Beyond direct attacks on healthcare facilities and medical personnel, Israeli forces have systematically destroyed key reproductive healthcare facilities in Gaza, including maternity wards, IVF centers, and clinics. In December 2023, an Israeli shell hit Gaza City's largest fertility clinic, the Al-Basma IVF center, "blasting the lids off five liquid nitrogen tanks stored in the corner of the embryology unit" and destroying more than 4,000 embryos.[75] In a single strike, thousands of potential future lives were lost. This further limited people from seeking options for fertility. The attack on Palestinian reproductive bodies is enacted indirectly as well, through Israel's deployment of new weaponry and nuclear bombings, such as white phosphorus, that will inevitably create consequences for fertility for future generations. Al Jazeera reported that the vast number of Israeli bombs on Gaza created so much asbestos that it will cause not only cancer but also issues around fertility and fetal defects for decades, which will impact generations even after the bombs stop.[76] These outcomes are not accidental: they are structurally produced by the conditions imposed through the blockade and the war, designed to "prevent births within a group."[77] When Israel targets

hospitals, maternity wards, IVF centers, and clinics, either through airstrikes, siege conditions, or blockade, it is not simply impeding healthcare access: it is enacting another form of reproductive genocidal violence aimed at preventing Palestinian births, increasing maternal and infant deaths, and disrupting generational continuity.

The targeting of maternity wards and hospitals in Gaza manifests a violent convergence of carcerality and reproductive control. In Gaza, reproductive injustice is not only symptomatic of war: it is a weapon of war, designed to sever generational continuity and extinguish Palestinian futurity. The destruction of medical infrastructure dismantles the systems necessary for Palestinians to sustain themselves, to reproduce safely, to raise healthy children, and to reproduce Palestinian histories, memories, and futures. Abolishing carcerality in Gaza is not only about the end of physical confinement, then, but the "building of life-affirming institutions" and the preservation of life-sustaining systems where Palestinian mothers can birth, live, and thrive free from militarized repression.[78]

"In Gaza, reproductive injustice is not only symptomatic of war: it is a weapon of war, designed to sever generational continuity and extinguish Palestinian futurity.

"WAKE UP, WORLD, OUR CHILDREN ARE BEING SLAUGHTERED."

In May 2025, a Palestinian boy was asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" He said, "Children in Gaza don't grow up."[79] Palestinian children are never perceived as children, but from the womb are figured as a demographic and terrorist threat to Jewish civilization. Images of babies and children charred, burned, and maimed continue to circulate without any significant outcry by Western media. One of the T-shirts discussed above depicted a bullseye aimed at the heart of a Palestinian child, including the caption, "The smaller they are, the harder it is."[80] Children are not simply collateral damage for Israel's bombings against Gaza: they are actively being targeted because they are the literal embodiment of Palestinian futurity and generationality.[81] This stripping of Palestinians of their status as children performs what Shalhoub-Kevorkian refers to as "unchilding."[82] Unchilding is "the state-sponsored process of systematically erasing the innocence, vulnerability, and status of Palestinian children . . . the goal is to render the future of Palestinian life disposable."[83] As she explains, this tactic is key to making them killable, jailable, and surveillable. Unchilding is thus a further form of reproductive genocide because it targets not just the child but the possibility of a future Palestinian life. The construction of Palestinian children as potential threats, combatants, or enemies justifies their incarceration, targeted killings, or surveillance under security pretexts, reflecting a carceral logic that criminalizes and dehumanizes children.[84]

Immediately after the October 7th attacks in 2023, Israel instituted a starvation campaign on the strip, prohibiting the entry of food, fuel, and other essential resources. Since the temporary ceasefire dissolved between Israel and Hamas back in February 2025, Israel has imposed a full blockade on food and medicine into Gaza, using starvation as a weapon of war. This is supported by so-called activists in Israeli civil society who attempt to block aid trucks into Gaza, setting some of the trucks on fire.[85] The blockade created extreme shortages, pushing Gaza's already fragile population into severe hunger and dehydration. This state-sponsored famine has been detrimental, especially to children. As of August 17, 2025, the Palestinian Health Ministry reported that 263 Palestinians died from malnutrition, including 112 children.[86]

Not only is Israel intentionally starving the population, but its systematic maiming of Palestinian children through indiscriminate attacks is also part of the broader strategy of reproductive genocide. Israel created one of the "biggest cohorts of pediatric amputees in history" not incidentally but intentionally.[87] In January 2025, the Gaza Ministry of Health announced a recorded 4,500 amputations since October 7, 2023, including eight hundred children.[88] The deliberate restriction of essential goods and services — ranging from caloric limits to the denial of clean drinking water to the withholding of electricity — constitutes what Ghassan Abu-Sittah terms the "titration of life."[89] These measures produce widespread conditions of debilitation that not only erode everyday survival but also intensify existing medical conditions and obstruct their treatment. Palestinian doctors perform surgeries on children, including amputations, without forms of anesthesia or pain relief.[90] Many of them will not survive

due to limited resources for proper treatment and are also unable to evacuate Gaza to receive life-saving care.[91]

Like the other forms of violence and injustice I have been tracing, the starving, maiming, and burning of Palestinian children in Gaza is not incidental but systemic. It marks a part of a broader strategy of reproductive genocide designed to disable the entire population, a slow form of genocide that does not rely solely on death but on rendering life impossible or unbearable. At the core of Israel's governance and its unending politics of harm, suffering, and dispossession is the destruction of childhood and the transformation of children's spaces into cages — death zones that put children on forced diets and deprive them of health services, schooling, and more. Conceptualizing childhood as a carceral space-time allows Israel to define and create the order of who is a human as well as who is a child. Once again, the process of unchilding constructs Palestinian children as "helpless, uncivilized, dangerous, and terrorist Other" to justify state violence and to create a binary between the Jewish Israeli child who must be protected versus the Palestinian unchild.[92] This is further reinforced in the discourses after the world learned of the death of the youngest Jewish hostage, Kfir Bibas, who received international attention, sympathy, and solidarity.[93] Israeli state discourses' insistence on protecting Jewish children so that they do not have the same fate as Kfir Bibas justifies confinement, starvation, and mass death of Palestinian children.

The logic that "no child is innocent," when applied uniquely to Palestinian children, operates as a central mechanism of elimination or reproductive genocide. To strip Palestinian children of innocence is to deny them recognition as lives worth protecting, thereby justifying their killing, maiming, or dispossession as inevitable and even necessary. This discourse does not merely reflect the impossibility of Palestinian parents raising children in conditions of safety; it actively works to sever the reproductive continuity of Palestinians as a people. If children embody the future of a community, then the refusal to grant them innocence is a refusal of that community's right to a future. The structural dehumanization of Palestinian children collapses childhood as a category of protection and renders Palestinian reproduction a site of elimination. Through this logic, reproductive violence converges with genocidal intent: destroying not only existing generations but also foreclosing the possibility of intergenerational survival, kinship, and continuity.

“ In a space that has gone from an open-air prison to an open graveyard, a space often defined by death, destruction, and debilitation, what scenes of reproductive life emerge?

CONCLUSION

In a space that has gone from an open-air prison to an open graveyard, a space often defined by death, destruction, and debilitation, what scenes of reproductive life emerge? In the words of scholars Loubna Qutami and Omar Zahzah, Palestinians "invent life where life is constantly under attack," such that "if Palestinians can teach anything to the world, anything at all, it would be these techniques of creating, inventing, and salvaging life where it is never meant to exist."[94] Palestinian families are, and have always been, resisting through the teaching and creation of life. Amid treating the most vulnerable, Dr. Ghassan Abu-Sittah narrates a story of a nineteen-year-old pregnant woman who came into the besieged Al-Shifa screaming with shrapnel in her abdomen. With a glimpse of hope, they found an obstetrician who was able to perform a Caesarean to save her and her child. Abu-Sittah cries, "After all that death, to hear a child! You kind of just feel the sound of life for the first time in 40 days of death. You feel the sound of life."[95] The act of birthing in the face of genocide enacts an affirmation of life that refuses submission to the totalizing hold of Zionist brutality and stakes a claim to future existence. This affirmation of life is evident in Palestinians in Gaza who refuse to leave their homes, often paying the ultimate price for staying. It is evident in the communities that have stepped forward to care for the orphans left behind, taking them in as their own. It is evident in how the camps become sites of family life, social networks, and resistance.

Abolition is not only about ending death-making systems but about creating the conditions for life and the reproduction of life, for individuals and across generations. The Palestinian Feminist Collective defines motherhood not as a role but "an assertion of agency and practice — an act of defiance against the forces of

oppression and violence that seek to diminish [Palestinians]. Our Palestinian mothers model resilience, teaching us that defiance is a revolutionary act, rooted in the very fabric of our home, families, and communities."[96] Gaza calls to abolitionist feminists as a critical, still-living site where the struggle against reproductive genocide is inseparable from the practice of freedom itself. To stand with Palestinians is to affirm that the defense of reproductive futurity — the ability to bear, raise, and sustain generations — is at the heart of any abolitionist feminist vision of justice.

MOTHER PROTECTING HER CHILDREN, OIL ON CANVAS. MALAK MATTAR. 2021.

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Self-Defense Is a Practice of Freedom

ALISA BIERRIA

If the violence is unabated, we risk losing our lives.
If we defend ourselves, we risk losing our freedom.
— Marissa Alexander[1]

Prisons do not end domestic and sexual violence; prisons intensify and institutionalize domestic and sexual violence.[2] The vast majority (some studies show up to 99 percent) of people in women's prisons experience domestic and/or sexual violence before they are incarcerated, and 84 percent of girls in juvenile detention experience family violence.[3] These numbers reflect what some researchers have called an abuse-to-prison pipeline.[4] Each point of this criminalizing pipeline — including policing, child welfare systems, medical systems, pretrial lock-up in jails, prosecution in court, imprisonment, ICE detention and deportation, and punitive reentry systems — uses its unique institutional power to humiliate, dehumanize, and trap survivors.[5] The pipeline feeds survivors into the prison system within many different contexts: survivors are criminalized for defending themselves, for "failing to protect" their children from their abuser, for taking their children away from an abusive relationship, for being an immigrant, for being a youth who runs away from an abusive home, for being coerced by an abusive person into criminalized activity, for being in the sex trade, and for self-medicating with criminalized drugs. Some survivors, such as Black survivors or disabled survivors, are constructed by the criminal punishment system as intrinsically criminal. The United States warehouses tens of thousands of survivors within punitive lockups that mirror, reproduce, and compound survivors' experiences of abuse.[6]

Founded in 2016 by a coalition of organizers from several campaigns organizing to free criminalized survivors — Chicago Alliance to Free Marissa Alexander, Free Marissa Now, and Stand With Nan-Hui — and the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, a statewide organization that also led several survivor defense campaigns, Survived & Punished (S&P) is a national feminist abolitionist organization advocating for the freedom of all survivors and the decriminalization of survival. In 2021, S&P organized a research initiative to produce the 2022 community-based research report, *Defending Self-Defense* (*DSD*).[7] Produced in collaboration with Project Nia and the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, *DSD* examines the criminal punishment of survivors who act in self-defense, with a focus on survivors who self-identify or are gendered by others as cis women, trans men, trans women, lesbian/bi/queer women, heterosexual women, and non-binary people.[8]

This essay expounds on *DSD*, for which I was one of four lead researchers along with Marissa Alexander, Colby Lenz, and Sydney Moon, as well as co-editor of the report with Colby Lenz. The report itself reflects a body of testimony, insights, and recommendations of a ten-person Survivor Advisory Board, a collective of survivors who were criminalized for acting in self-defense in the context of gender-based violence. This board included Marissa Alexander, Aylaliyah Birru, Tewkunzi Green, Robbie Hall, Renata Hill, Wendy Howard, Roshawn Knight, Bresha Meadows, Ky Peterson, and Anastazia Schmid, with additional insights from Patreese Johnson and Alisha Walker. We also incorporated insights from other survivors who had been targeted by police and prosecutors, as well as organizers and advocates within the broader S&P network (including other survivors and family members) who have collaborated with

criminalized survivors to secure their freedom. Together we collected a body of crucial insights, analyses, ideas, and recommendations from survivors who were punished for defending their lives.

A collaborative report by design, *DSD* is structured for readers' proactive use by providing tools to learn about the criminalization of survival, conceptualize its abolition, and take action for its dismantling. The heart of the report features key themes identified by participants that map how and why survivor self-defense is systematically criminalized and outline patterns that shape the experience of self-defense and its criminalization.[9] Additionally, the report provides a wide scope of recommended legal, advocacy, and organizing action items; shares a description of its participatory research methodology; and includes several practical resources, such as an organizational assessment worksheet, an explanation of self-defense law that centers the concerns of survivors facing prosecution, and resources for further learning.

The *DSD* introduction, which provides a brief political and scholarly overview of the criminalization of survivor self-defense, is a generative springboard for this essay.[10] Specifically, I place survivors' testimonies and analyses in critical engagement with academic research and a legacy of anti-carceral feminist organizing to illuminate a key insight made evident by the report: "self-defense" is not only a single act of refusal to a violent event but can also be conceptualized as a *way of being*. For example, self-defense can be understood as a practice and paradigm that enables conceptual shifts such as multifaceted meanings of the "self," nonlinear formations of time, or radical conceptions of agency. Further, while in the *DSD* introduction a series of important points from the text are graphically highlighted to help contextualize the findings from the report, in this discussion I revise and reframe these ideas to propose nine working principles that I contend are building blocks for a feminist abolitionist paradigm for "self-defense." This paradigm reveals how survivor self-defense can pose a foundational challenge to carceral patriarchy by both refusing violence and refusing the normalization of that violence.

In short, I aim to explore in more detail the implicit theoretical interventions within the report. Situating this research in company with the other critical essays in this special issue of *The Scholar and Feminist Online* also helps to frame the analytical intervention of this work within a broader context of feminist critiques of carceral violence and feminist formations of abolitionist politics.

This essay begins with a brief political history of survivor self-defense to situate self-defense within a feminist political context. Then I examine two critical approaches to the politics of self-defense. First, I introduce a framework — the 'no way out' bind — that outlines how the interlocking triad of gender-based violence, criminalization, and social abandonment produces a deadly political economy that erodes survivors' capacity to secure safety. Second, I explore the legacy of 'self-defense' as a legal concept and a social-political framework to consider how self-defense has been constructed as antagonistic to the lives of Black survivors and other survivors positioned as intrinsically criminal. The final section of this report reviews what I have identified as nine principles of survivor self-defense developed from findings from *DSD*. While the first three principles describe the meaning of survivor self-defense as an emergency measure when one is confronted with life-threatening violence with 'no way out', the final six principles map a living idea of 'self-defense' as not just an immediate safety strategy but as a broader form of political resistance and a way of being in the world.

A BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY OF SURVIVOR SELF-DEFENSE

To contextualize the discussion about how criminalized survivors shape the concept of "self-defense," let us briefly consider how survivors and organizers[11] have contested, politicized, and refigured the concept in recent years. The anti-violence field in the US was catalyzed by feminist mobilization in the early 1970s within vibrant political conditions shaped by multifaceted social movements in the US and beyond, such as the women's liberation movement, Black Panther Party mobilizations, and mass anti-colonial struggles in the US and around the world.[12] The first rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters (as they were called then) began emerging in 1972 within a political atmosphere that demanded an end to rape and domestic violence, fiercely critiqued state violence and repression, and advocated for the right to self-defense for Black people, women, and other oppressed peoples.[13]

Within this political context, survivors and organizers led pivotal participatory defense campaigns in the 1970s calling for the freedom

of Joan Little, Dessie Woods, Yvonne Wanrow, and Inez García — Black, Native, and Latina women who were targeted for prosecution to punish them for their acts of self-defense in the context of gender-based violence.[14] As demonstrated by the thousands of people who participated in these four campaigns, participatory defense campaigns mobilize coalitions and individuals at the grassroots to collectively advocate for the freedom of someone who is targeted by systems of criminalization. Campaigns are participatory in that they engage a broad base of people through storytelling, media-making, fundraising, direct action organizing, and coalition-building.

Organizers use the power of an individual story to illustrate systemic injustices embedded in systems of criminalization and to create a bigger platform for a critical and comprehensive analysis of violence. As such, these four campaigns catalyzed intersecting critiques of racial violence, gender violence, and carceral violence. As historian Emily Thuma contends, the campaigns teach us that organizing to end sexual and domestic violence was "indivisibly linked" with struggles against the abuses of the carceral state.[15] Further, the organizing precedents created by these coalitional campaigns helped secure these survivors' legal victories, which, in turn, set key legal precedents for self-defense. The Joan Little decision set a precedent for women survivors to use lethal force in self-defense against sexual violence, and both the Wanrow and García decisions broke new ground for the courts to take the context of domestic violence into account in cases where women survivors kill their abusers.[16]

Despite these gains, the US anti-violence field became more aligned with, rather than in critical opposition to, systems of criminalization in the decades that followed. As Beth Richie writes, over the course of the 1980s and 1990s the anti-violence field "won the mainstream and lost the movement," and participatory defense organizing for survivors became relatively scarce.[17] Still, many anti-violence advocates continued to argue that advancing freedom and safety for survivors requires political organizing and a critical stance towards systems of punishment. As Mimi Kim writes, insurgent advocates and survivors ramped up ongoing efforts to bridge public critiques of state violence and intimate violence in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[18] These efforts were amplified by the impact of Incite!, a national feminist of color organization established in 2000, which included anti-violence victim advocates who mapped out a feminist abolitionist politics from the context of that experience.[19] In this political climate, participatory defense campaigns surfaced in 2011–2012 when pivotal campaigns to free several Black survivors — Cece McDonald, the New Jersey 4 (Venice Brown, Terraine Dandrige, Renata Hill, and Patreese Johnson), and Marissa Alexander — emerged, notably around the same time as the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement. These defense campaigns had a catalyzing impact on many advocates, but that impact usually unfolded outside of, in the margins of, and/or in contention with the non-profit anti-violence field.[20] For example, in 2014, Hyejin Shim, a former advocate at a domestic violence shelter, received a call for help from Nan-Hui Jo, a Korean survivor who was targeted by a web of criminalizing forces.[21] Shim reflected, "I didn't view this as a case where I'd be someone's domestic violence advocate. At that point it was clear that what was needed most was not case management. . . . In this case you had 'domestic violence experts' like the district attorney saying that this was not a domestic violence case. So then what? We needed to organize."[22]

The number of autonomous survivor defense campaigns expanded over the next ten years and, along with Survived & Punished, became part of the larger abolitionist/feminist anti-violence political landscape.[23] More recent participatory defense campaigns focusing on survivors' right to self-defense include campaigns calling for the freedom of trans survivors, such as Ky Peterson and Eisha Love; immigrant survivors, such as Aylaliyah Birru; survivors in the sex industry, such as Alisha Walker and Chrystul Kizer; survivors who are mothers, such as Tracy McCarter, Maddesyn George, Nikki Addimondo, Wendy Howard, Roshawn Knight, and Cherelle Baldwin; and survivors who are children, such as Bresha Meadows; among others.[24]

Further, participatory and mass clemency campaigns calling for commutations and pardons of survivors after they have been convicted also have a critical social movement legacy. This includes groundbreaking leadership by organizations such as Convicted Women Against Abuse (which was founded in 1989 by incarcerated survivors), Free Battered Women in California, the Michigan Women's Justice & Clemency Project, and the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, among others.[25] Other families and organizations currently lead clemency campaigns for criminalized survivors, including Free Hearts in Nashville, Survived & Punished

New York, Survived & Punished California, Love & Protect in Chicago, Moms United Against Violence and Incarceration also in Chicago, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, the devi co-op in Atlanta, and the Illinois Prison Project's Women & Survivors Project.

Like participatory defense, participatory clemency often challenges the underlying logics of prison itself.[26] *DSD* contributor Tewkunzi Green reflects,

> Clemency was a chance to tell my truth — a truth I've been made to feel the courts do not want to hear, especially having gone through a sentencing hearing that led to a sentence of 34 years. With clemency, I was asking, 'Can somebody hear my voice?' And then, with the success of our efforts, I felt it made me visible. Clemency made me visible after the courts and prison had made me feel invisible.[27]

As Green teaches us, collective efforts to free survivors can help enable a public platform for survivors to express themselves on their own terms. Rather than their stories being mediated through carceral distortions, media stigma, academic consumption, or even defense campaign organizers' rhetoric — which is often angled towards strategic talking points — campaigns raise awareness of survivors' cases, leading to opportunities for survivors to share their testimonies through autobiographies, letters, essays, and interviews.[28] These testimonies provide indispensable insights into the expansiveness of the meaning of self-defense.

Through advocating for the freedom of criminalized survivors, survivors and organizers have developed a living politics of self-defense that destabilizes carceral "common sense" by enabling a public discourse that denaturalizes gender violence (intimate, state, and carceral) and maps an expansive understanding of what freedom demands of us.

"Through advocating for the freedom of criminalized survivors, survivors and organizers have developed a living politics of self-defense that destabilizes carceral 'common sense' . . . and maps an expansive understanding of what freedom demands of us.

NO WAY OUT

With respect to the stakes of self-defense, Marissa Alexander gets to the heart of the matter: "If the violence is unabated, we risk losing our lives. If we defend ourselves, we risk losing our freedom."[29] Alexander, a Black mother of three based in Florida, survived a brutal attack by her estranged husband because she fired a warning shot that compelled him to stop his assault and leave the home. Although the gunshot caused no injuries and her abuser detailed his history of violence on the record in a deposition, Alexander was denied protection under Florida's Stand Your Ground law, prosecuted, and sentenced to a mandatory minimum of twenty years in prison.[30]

In this section, I examine the political-economic conditions in which survivor self-defense unfolds as an emergency measure in life-threatening circumstances. Alexander's striking summary of the 'loss of life or loss of freedom' trap reveals what we might understand as a deadly 'no way out' bind that enables survivors' deaths rather than their lives. I propose the 'no way out' bind as a framework through which to understand the ongoing material conditions of survivor self-defense. Stabilized by three interlocking elements, the 'no way out' bind (represented in Figure 1) systematically restricts options for escape and closes off pathways for support and survivability. The elements include 1) the combined pervasiveness and lethality of gender-based violence; 2) the dearth of material resources required to help survivors to transform or escape conditions of violence; and 3) systems of criminalization dead set on punishing survivors who take action to save their own lives given the lack of options.[31] Importantly, the *convergence* of the bind's three elements creates a condition of closure, their interdependent relationship blocking off options to pursue for survival. Below I describe how the bind operates in survivors' lives by considering each element and the ways in which it converges with the others.

Domestic and sexual violence, the first element of this bind, has the distinguishing quality of being both stunningly common and potentially catastrophic for survivors and their families — both in terms of the immediate crisis of violence and the pernicious conditions of violence that accumulate over time. Every day in the United States, four women will be murdered by an intimate partner and over half of all homicides of women are domestic violence related.[32] Gender violence is particularly deadly for trans women, Black women, Native women, and other survivors of color.[33] Further, when survivors

attempt to escape their abusive relationships, their abusers' violence tends to escalate, becoming more rather than less lethal.[34] Domestic and sexual violence produce heightened forms of deadly precarity for survivors, many of whom are forced to manage the punishing effects across time, their lives remaining haunted for years.

The second element of the bind, social abandonment, flags the decimation of the social safety net, punitive and exclusionary policies within existing social services, social isolation, and blame, all of which obstruct survivors who search for a route to safety. Courts justify punishing survivors who act in self-defense by holding survivors responsible for the violence they experience if they do not — or cannot — escape.[35] But escape where? The chronic lack of safe, affordable, and accessible housing ensures there are few to zero escape locations. Several years of recent surveys by the National Network to End Domestic Violence found that "in a single day in 2024, domestic violence victims made 14,095 unmet requests for services" — including emergency shelter, housing, transportation, childcare, and legal representation — which could not be provided because programs lacked the resources to meet their needs.[36] Further, some domestic violence shelters will not accept certain survivors of domestic violence, such as survivors with criminal convictions, trans and non-binary survivors, disabled survivors, survivors with children, or survivors who do not speak English.[37] Shelters can also pose high risks if the program enacts punitive policies and practices — such as mandatory reporting policies that increase survivors' vulnerability to being targeted by police or Child Protective Services, ultimately becoming integral to survivors' criminalization.[38]

DSD contributor Anastazia Schmid who was criminalized for defending her life asserts that the criminal punishment system exploits the lack of safe housing options to "keep survivors incarcerated the whole time," including while awaiting trial and as a reason for denying parole.[39] Indeed, in a 'no way out' bind, emergency housing becomes a site of criminalization, while jails and prisons, sites of brutal punishment, are invoked as housing "solutions." *DSD* contributors also emphasize that both incarceration and domestic and sexual violence can cause and create compounded economic insecurity. Gender-based violence and criminalization are powerful pressure points within racial capitalism, entrapping survivors within webs of violence that intersect and interlock with each other by design.

FIGURE 1. NO WAY OUT BIND, CREATED BY AUTHOR

To detail further, the 1970s dismantling of the welfare state unfolded in concert with the era's radical expansion of prisons, policing, and prosecution.[40] This interdependent relationship took definitive form during Nixon's and Reagan's "wars" on crime and drugs, respectively, as Black women were scapegoated as so-called "welfare queens" to justify the severe cutbacks of food and housing support. It was intensified under Clinton's 1994 Crime Bill and 1996 Welfare Reform Act, legislation that ossified this transition into what has become a "prison nation," as Beth Richie writes.[41] This development has recently escalated to disastrous levels with the Trump administration's radical dismantling of the already inadequate social safety infrastructure and corresponding advancement of authoritarianist policies.[42] These policies include mass removals of immigrants as well as military occupations of cities that destabilize communities, deepening a condition of social crisis for many survivors. Just this year, widespread ICE raids, including in "sensitive zones" such as shelters, have made immigrant survivors terrified to seek support.[43] Federal funding already earmarked for housing and other services for survivors of domestic violence has also been threatened for cancellation, with the federal government citing grantees' support of diversity, equity, and inclusion or services for trans survivors as a justification.[44]

Given the symbiotic relationship between the erosion of social

resources needed to contend with gender-based violence and the intensification of prisons and policing, it is no surprise that survivors have become increasingly targeted with severe criminal punishment, the third element of the 'no way out' bind. In 2005, the New York Department of Correctional Services found that two-thirds of women incarcerated for killing someone close to them had been abused by that person.[45] Survivors prosecuted for domestic homicide who do not conform to the "perfect victim" myth, such as being considered "good wives and mothers," are more likely to receive a guilty verdict.[46] In a 2007 resolution, the Criminal Justice Committee of the American Bar Association asserted that the judicial system frequently metes out long prison sentences and denies parole and clemency to survivors of domestic violence, assuring their long-term incarceration and, often, life-long punishment.[47] For example, in a 2023 report, the UC Sentencing Project found that parole boards have refused to grant parole to incarcerated survivors because, if they disclose that they are survivors, the board uses the disclosure as evidence that they fail to take responsibility for their crime.[48]

The 'no way out' bind is fundamentally anti-survivor and anti-*survival*. *DSD* contributors and other survivors have called for the transformation of each element of this bind and the dismantling of any legal structure capable of sustaining and endorsing this brutal trap. *DSD* contributor Renata Hill concludes, "I pray one day a new system will be created by people like us, those of us who have survived and lived through our experiences. This system was not made for us at all."[49] Hill was a member of the New Jersey 4, a group of Black lesbian friends who were targeted by prosecutors after they fought off an attacker who physically assaulted them and threatened to rape them.[50] Given the 'no way out' bind, we can consider Hill's assertion that "the system was not made for us at all" in the context of trying to defend one's life while being systematically locked into a political-economic trap where the possibility of life is refused in all directions.

Further, Hill's observation suggests that the system of "self-defense" itself, as a legal "right" or a cultural concept, was also not made for survivors *at all*. I turn to the legal formation and the social-political history of the concept of self-defense, exploring how survivors become blocked from accessing self-defense as a legal entitlement or a legitimate narrative about their experience within a social climate that reifies blame and punishment.

WHEN SELF-DEFENSE IS OUTSIDE OF THE LAW, SURVIVAL IS OUTLAWED

If self-defense is, in some ways, technically protected by the law, why are survivors being criminally punished for self-defense as if they are breaking the law? While the 'no way out' bind describes a political economy that locks survivors into a 'loss of life or loss of freedom' trap,[51] survivors and researchers have described in detail how self-defense laws in the US were never designed to protect survivors' lives. As historians contend, legal protection for self-defense was originally designed for property-owning white men.[52] Courts commonly reject gender-based violence as legitimate justifications for self-defense, either by the law's design or through its application.

Clarifying the scope of self-defense law in her legal appendix to the *DSD* report, legal scholar Sydney Moon states, "When defending against a homicide charge, self-defense law requires that the defendant . . . reasonably believed lethal force was both (1) necessary and (2) proportionate to repel an imminent attack which would have resulted in death or serious bodily injury."[53] Courts determine if these two standards — necessary and proportionate — have been met based on the "objective reasonableness" standard, or whether a "reasonable person" would agree that lethal force was necessary. In other words, survivors' own evaluation of the need to use force is considered subjective, but, under law, the imagined reasonable person is considered objective.

Despite the fantasy of objectivity, what juries and judges understand as "reasonable" remains deeply anchored to the social and political context of the case and self-defense as a broader concept.[54] Because of the social and political evolution of self-defense laws in the US, the dominant paradigm of "self-defense" fails to resonate with the reality of survivor self-defense. For example, legal narratives frequently center scenarios involving sudden attacks by strangers — often racialized as non-white men — as the default justification for the legal protection of self-defense.[55] Yet, most women are killed by people that they know, and of those homicides, most are committed by people with whom victims had an intimate relationship. The Violence Policy Center found that, in 2019, ten times as many women were murdered by a man they knew (1,476 victims) than were killed by a man they did not know.[56] Of the men that the victims knew, 62 percent were husbands or intimate acquaintances.[57] Moreover, a

Washington Post study found that 69 percent of trans women who were murdered between 2010 and 2015 were killed by acquaintances, half of whom were intimately involved with them.[58] Yet decades of racist crime panic discourse have primed juries and judges with a "stranger as danger" narrative of self-defense that does not align with the majority of survivors' experiences.

As *DSD* contributors show, the concept of "imminence" looms as a legal standard which requires a threat to be both imminent and immediately confrontational for self-defense to be legally defensible.[59] Feminist advocates have argued that this standard fails to meet the living reality of gender violence in which the experience of an imminent threat can exist as a constant condition rather than a discrete event.[60] For example, Michelle Horton, sister of criminalized survivor Nikki Addimondo and a leader in the campaign to free her, recounted that Addimondo's legal team did not adequately explain "why a man would think he has such complete control over his victim that he doesn't need to be on his feet at the time."[61] Therefore, imminence has long challenged feminist legal advocates to determine how to translate survivors' lived experiences of gender-based violence within this legal framework of time.

In the late 1970s, Lenore Walker introduced the concept of "Battered Women's Syndrome" to contend that domestic violence places survivors in states of "learned helplessness," so that instead of escaping, survivors use lethal force when their abuser is not expecting it rather than wait for the violence to become immediately at hand.[62] However, invoking Battered Women's Syndrome often fails as a legal strategy for multiple reasons, such as the concept hinging on a stereotyped image of "victim" which tends to be racialized as white[63] and, as Horton asserts, juries feeling alienated by a concept they perceive as pathologizing of women.[64]

In addition to implicit exclusion of survivors from the self-defense legal threshold, lawmakers explicitly deny survivors access to some self-defense protections. Stand Your Ground (SYG) laws, for example, aim to widen the scope of protection for self-defense, eliminating the longstanding "duty to retreat" requirement when one is faced with a violent threat and instead affirming people's choice to "stand their ground" and use force if they perceive another person as a threat. However, some states intentionally exclude survivors of domestic violence from SYG protection. For example, a South Carolina prosecutor asserted that the state lawmakers' intent for SYG "was to provide law-abiding citizens greater protections from external threats in the form of intruders and attackers. We believe that applying the statute so that [it reaches] into our homes and personal relationships is inconsistent with (its) wording and intent."[65] Denise Crisafi writes that, of the twenty-three states with SYG laws, only four of them "provide greater acknowledgement and enforcement of protections for victims of domestic violence and family violence," yet eight of them "require victims of domestic violence to retreat before responding with deadly force."[66]

In Marissa Alexander's case the prosecutor used logic that directly contradicted the principle of SYG, arguing that, if Alexander was truly afraid, she should have retreated when attacked, even if it meant "jumping out of a window."[67] As I have argued elsewhere, although the stated purpose of SYG is, if one feels fear, one has the right to remain where one is and defend oneself, the court in Alexander's case argued the reverse: because Alexander remained in the home and defended herself, she could not have been afraid.[68] This established a contradiction impossible for her to resolve: fear was required to justify standing one's ground, but to convincingly perform "fear" for the court, Alexander would have had to retreat.

"If you do everything to get on the right side of the law, and it is a law that does not apply to you, where do you go from there? — Marissa Alexander

Less than a year after she was convicted, George Zimmerman, also based in Florida, was acquitted of killing Black teenager Trayvon Martin, the jury citing SYG as the reason for their decision.[69] His acquittal reflects statistical patterns in which homicides against Black people are more likely to be deemed justifiable in SYG cases.[70] Critics of SYG juxtaposed Zimmerman's case with Alexander's, arguing that the two cases exemplified how, from prosecution to defense, the application of SYG treats Black life as if it is disposable. In an interview Alexander interrogated the law as a dead-end route, asking, "If you do everything to get on the right side of the law, and it is a law that does not apply to you, where do you go from there?"[72]

Contributors to the *DSD* report identify many limits of legal frameworks for self-defense, critically examining the anti-survivor climate within a judicial system that survivors are forced to navigate. They critique legal terms and defense strategies that are relevant to survivors who are prosecuted for defending their lives, such as Battered Women's Syndrome and Stand Your Ground, as ultimately ineffective in their efforts to wage a legal defense and represent their own experiences. They wonder what metric used by the judicial system — what level of violence, how close to death — could ever activate their legal right to self-defense? How does one navigate a judicial system instilled with the power to determine whether one is legally permitted to go on living? As Wendy Howard asserts,

> I think people don't understand the constant abuse you're going through and [the times] you didn't use self-defense for previous abuse, like being strangled and held down by a full-grown man until you pass out. At what point are you allowed to defend yourself?[73]

DSD contributors assert that chronic dangers integral to an unjust legal system — such as lack of consistent access to skilled, respectful, and affordable counsel; the extreme financial and emotional costs of a trial; the dangers of pre-trial lock-up; and prosecutorial incentives to pursue the most severe convictions for survivors who use force to defend their lives — must urgently be addressed. However, others reflect on the hollowness of trying to defend yourself in a court system that is already organized around your destruction. For survivors, self-defense is lawlessness.

THE INCONCEIVABILITY OF SELF-DEFENSE

While the *DSD* report outlines reforms recommended by contributors that may strengthen the possibility of their legal defense, contributors also make it clear that the reasons why the legal system punishes survivors for defending themselves exceed the letter of the law and even the structural violence built into legal proceedings. For example, *DSD* contributor Ky Peterson, a Black trans survivor, recounts,

> My lawyer wanted to give me a plea deal and I'm telling him this is not right. And he tells me, 'You got to think about living in the south, they see you walking in their neighborhood at night, they're gonna swear you're a criminal.' Why would you say that? He's telling me pretty much that you can't defend yourself just because of how you look.[74]

The legal advice that Peterson received — "you can't defend yourself because of how you look" — resonates with Marissa Alexander's view that the cultural politics of self-defense has deep historical roots. She asserts,

> I find that conceptions of 'self-defense' are rooted in a romanticized Western type of bad guy, good guy, Hollywood kind of thing, a very white heterosexual patriarchal lens. We want to start looking at self-defense with a broader lens [to understand the experiences of] women and then take it a step further and look at Black women. But from that realm, self-defense can't even be conceived by these entities because they've had such a narrow ideology about what self-defense actually should look like. And since it is so pro-hetero, so pro-patriarchal, and so pro-white, it is very difficult for them to shift that.[75]

The inconceivability of self-defense for Black survivors in particular has a legacy established in slavery, such as in the case of Celia, a young Black woman in Missouri who was sentenced to death by hanging in 1855 for killing the man who enslaved and raped her for years.[76] In her bracing study of the criminalization of Black women survivors during the Jim Crow era, historian Sarah Haley details how their "self-defense against domestic violence meant internment in carceral dungeons that they could not shake."[77] Then and now, Black women's attempts to survive violence by intimate partners makes them vulnerable to violence by police, prosecutors, judges, and prison guards, entrapping them, as Haley writes, "in a circle of unyielding assault."[78] Further, Kali N. Gross argues that this refusal of US law to protect Black women who act in self-defense reflects legacies of an "exclusionary politics of protection" which bars Black women from legal protection from violence while simultaneously enacting punishing brutality against them.[79]

Native survivors are also prosecuted for defending their lives from deadly attacks produced by domestic and sexual violence, colonial control, and the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S).[80] As Chrystos writes about the women who were "locked in my joints:" "We are prisoners of a long war."[81] The 2021 federal prosecution of Maddesyn George, a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes and a survivor who defended herself from a non-tribal member who sexually

assaulted her, exemplifies this long war of ongoing gendered colonial violence. As the defense committee of the Campaign to Free Maddesyn George asserted, "Incarceration is a tool of Indigenous removal, and Maddesyn is now missing from her community." Their campaign teaches us how the criminalization of survivors sustains the continuity of genocidal violence.[82]

Survivor self-defense represents a refusal to comply with gendered norms, which also places them outside of conceivable self-defense. For example, police and courts often assert that survivors who fight back against rape and domestic violence do not do so out of self-defense or fear, but only out of vengeance, aggression, or anger.[83] Criminalizing institutions rationalize this assertion by erasing survivors' complex narratives and replacing them with already existing and available racist and sexist tropes, such as the "angry Black woman."[84] Likewise, when the New Jersey 4 defended themselves from sexual and physical violence in New York, the press facilitated their punishment by labeling them a "lesbian wolf pack," instigating anti-Black and anti-lesbian public contempt which further armed prosecutors with powerful tropes.[85] As Beth Richie reflects, "It is almost as if Black women in the court system are seen to not have a full range of emotions . . . not fear, pain, or terror."[86] Indeed, in her testimony for policymakers, Marissa Alexander asserted that she did not see why she could not have been both angry and afraid when she defended her life.[87] Further, prisons attempt to coerce survivors into regurgitating these violent narratives in the name of "rehabilitation." *DSD* contributor Alisha Walker assesses, "Instead of making a way to help heal traumatized survivors of domestic violence, they shame you and force you to believe you are the monster that the court made you out to be."[88]

Prosecutors also characterize survivors engaged in criminalized action, such as the sex trade or street economies, as already guilty and outside of the law and, therefore, undeserving of protection when they act in self-defense. In their groundbreaking report, the Young Women's Empowerment Project provide a nuanced definition of sex trade that incorporates several key factors: the complexity and diversity of survivors' experiences across contexts of sex work, the sex trade, and sex trafficking; the importance of survivors defining their experiences on their own terms; and the reality that survivors in the sex industry are disproportionately vulnerable to experiencing violence and to being blamed for that violence.[89] For example, in analyzing the criminalization of Alisha Walker and Cyntoia Brown, young Black women criminalized for acting in self-defense in the context of the sex trade, Mariame Kaba and Brit Schulte write:

> Alisha's act of self-defense was met with the violence of a racist court system that branded her a manipulative criminal mastermind. Alisha and Cyntoia were both young Black women whose bodies were inscribed with inherent criminality and were, to some degree, presumed guilty until proven innocent . . . Cyntoia and Alisha's radical acts of self-love and preservation were criminalized by those with authority; each had the carceral weight of racism and whorephobia stacked against them.[90]

Further, immigrant survivors who are vulnerable to a web of criminalization from ICE and federal and state prisons often lack access to reforms that aim to end the criminalization of survivors, especially reforms that distinguish the so-called "deserving" from the "undeserving."[91] For example, immigrant survivors with criminal convictions, including for self-defense, can be disqualified from the Violence Against Women Act's (VAWA) protection from deportation because their convictions prevent them from meeting the law's "good moral character" standard, which punishes survivors for "failing" to conform to "perfect victim"/"perfect immigrant" expectations.[92] Moreover, if immigrant survivors incarcerated in state prisons receive rare opportunities for release through a governor's commutation or sentencing reform, they can still be subject to relentless carceral punishment through ICE detention and deportation.[93] *DSD* contributor Aylaliyah Birru analyzed the impact this prison-to-prison pipeline has on survivors' lives. She noted,

> I have been a victim of crime or abuse, but also I have been doubly, triply criminalized by the state and federal government as well . . . In prison I was able to get a lot of milestones. I got a little over two years taken off my six-year sentence. But then I was transferred to ICE detention because I was not a US citizen. So, I was in ICE detention for another year and a half, which basically was all the time that was taken off through my milestones, unfortunately. But you know, that's just part of this horrible system.[94]

Birru reveals what other survivors, scholars, and activists also lay bare: in innumerable ways, a broad range of social identities and experiences are weaponized by police, prosecutors, juries, and judges to distort or dismiss survivors' experiences of violence in order to justify their unyielding punishment.[95] Tracy McCarter, the survivor at the center of the #StandWithTracy campaign, reflects, "I wonder if anyone who

looks like me ever actually experiences the presumption of 'innocence.' I was marked guilty from the start. These labels mean nothing inside of a system that is itself guilty of stealing so many lives."[96]

"Self-defense as a legal claim, a social entitlement, or a cultural concept was not designed for survivors because it was never meant for survivors. Yet, as we have seen, survivors claim and reclaim self-defense as part of their testimony while navigating a world of meaning mobilized against their survival.

Reflecting on Black women's resistance in the US along multiple fronts, Audre Lorde memorably emphasizes a lesson she says we must not forget: "We were never meant to survive."[97] Accordingly, self-defense as a legal claim, a social entitlement, or a cultural concept was not designed for survivors because it was never meant for survivors. Yet, as we have seen, survivors claim and reclaim self-defense as part of their testimony while navigating a world of meaning mobilized against their survival. As demonstrated in the political history of self-defense explored earlier, survivors not only defend their lives but find ways to define self-defense on their own terms, from the reality of their own experiences. In the next section, I review how *DSD* contributors map a paradigm of self-defense that resists systems of punitivity and affirms practices of connection, care, and freedom.

SELF-DEFENSE AS ABOLITIONIST PARADIGM

Through their testimonies, analyses, and reflections, contributors to the *DSD* report outlined an expansive and transformative meaning of self-defense.[98] Their view of self-defense includes more than its legal definition, and more than the act of using force, including deadly force, to protect themselves and others from another person's violence. Taken together, I contend that the convergence of their ideas crystallizes an abolitionist feminist paradigm of self-defense.

Here, I propose nine principles of survivor self-defense based on their insights and ideas. The first three principles reflect survivors' understanding of defending one's life while being systematically locked into a 'no way out' bind, where the possibility of life is refused in all directions. In this context, survivors shape the meaning of self-defense as not just a safety strategy, but a survival imperative. The final six principles reveal how survivor self-defense has the capacity to clarify the stakes of survival beyond a carceral-patriarchal system of meaning. Together, these nine principles map a feminist abolitionist paradigm of self-defense, revealing how survivor self-defense ruptures the normalization of punishment and disposability, and models a practice, an ethic, and a way of being that affirms life.

PRINCIPLE 1: Self-defense is how survivors halt an attack, whether imminent or unabating.

As noted above, imminence has long challenged feminist legal advocates to determine how to translate survivors' lived experiences of gender-based violence within this legal framework of time. Rather than adapting the legal concept of imminence, *DSD* contributors described gender violence as unfolding within multiple formations of time: discrete instances of violent acts that are part of an escalation or feel like they come out of nowhere; threats of violence that are periodic or sustained; and violence that becomes so integral to domestic life that the "beginnings" and "ends" of violence lose meaning — violence just is. As this more complex temporality of violence reveals, survivors are forced to consider the broad context of violence while deciding in a "split-second" whether or how to defend themselves. As *DSD* contributor Ky Peterson reflected, "It's not that we don't care about other people. But it's that split-second where you have to decide, do you want to live?"[99]

Further, the time of violence as experienced by survivors can be a lifetime of events including their many attempts at securing safety for themselves and others. *DSD* contributor Anastazia Schmid reflects, "We put so much focus and emphasis on the moment of the crime itself while we completely disregard every single thing that happened before, and every single thing that's going to happen after . . . it's like you are frozen forever as if there is nothing more to you as a person or nothing more to your life, other than that one single

moment and incident."[100]

In fact, as *DSD* contributors show, police, courts, and prisons shape the temporal experience of sexual and domestic violence as they become integral to the before, during, and afterlife of that violence. Their experiences reveal that punitive systems not only fail to consider survivors' experience of gender-based violence, they are *themselves* a continuation of that violence. For example, as Colby Lenz and I argue elsewhere, court processes and procedures systematically stabilize and extend the violence that survivors experience, exhibiting signs of what we diagnose as "battering court syndrome."[101] Prosecuting survivors for defending themselves exemplifies battering court syndrome, a phenomenon in which a system that purports to repair violence only makes violence ever more imminent.

PRINCIPLE 2: Self-defense is how survivors get to safety within a 'no way out' bind.

Patreese Johnson, a contributor to the *DSD* report, was also a member of the New Jersey 4. Johnson notes that the prosecutor attempted to blame her and her friends for being attacked because they did not call law enforcement for help, but when police did arrive on the scene, Johnson and her friends were arrested. As Johnson details, the police had a record of enacting unrelenting racist harassment and violence against herself, her family, and her community before this experience. She states,

> Because of our history with the police, we're definitely not calling the cops. It's never the first thing to be like, oh my God, we're being attacked, let's call the cops. Nobody in our community would do that. We're going to defend ourselves. Like, we know how to defend ourselves to the best of our ability and we all go home together. At that moment I'm thinking about saving myself. It's not an option not to make it home.[102]

Though survivors who act in self-defense are often blamed for not seeking police for help, police often exacerbate violence rather than ensure survivors' safety.[103] The 'no way out' bind clarifies that institutions that survivors are expected to access in cases of life-threatening emergencies are also sites of punishment or physical danger. Yet, as Johnson states, it's not an option not to make it home, which situates self-defense as a life imperative.

PRINCIPLE 3: Self-defense is how survivors stay alive amidst social abandonment.

Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie summarize a core irony at the heart of replacing the social welfare state with the carceral state: "Cops fuel the problem and then offer themselves as the only viable solution."[104] As noted above, US political leaders pursued a decades-long systemic divestment from non-carceral resources for safety and survival, leaving survivors with police as their only resource. Yet, police often fail to support survivors for a myriad of reasons, including believing the issue is a private family matter, assessing the survivor as not credible, or simply viewing that person as disposable.[105] Given limited public resources, the failures of police to respond to violence can lead to catastrophic consequences.

As the anti-violence field became increasingly collaborative with carceral systems, advocates called for mandatory arrest policies to address the problem of police abandonment. Becoming widespread in the 1980s and 1990s, mandatory arrest policies required police to arrest the person whom they determined was the appropriate person to arrest when responding to domestic violence calls.[106] While supporters hoped mandatory arrest would compel police to more effectively support survivors, the arrest and death rates of many survivors, especially Black survivors, increased.[107]

Even in mandatory arrest states, police continue to dismiss survivors in life-threatening circumstances.[108] For example, *DSD* contributor Bresha Meadows was fourteen years old at the time she was arrested in Ohio for defending her life and her family from her abusive father. She recounted her experience trying to get help before she was forced to take defensive action, stating,

> I called the cops to let them know I had run away and I didn't feel safe at home. I told them that I didn't feel comfortable going back. They told me to come to the police station because I was still a runaway and whoever I was with would get a kidnapping charge. So I did go to the police station, and they sent me home with no questions whatsoever.[109]

Together, Patreese Johnson and Bresha Meadows teach us that police intervention and police abandonment are, in fact, different sides of the same coin: police intervention can escalate gender violence, while police abandonment can affirm gender violence. Given the dismantling of the social safety infrastructure, positioning police as an emergency response to gender-based violence, whether they

respond or not, leaves survivors with the essential option of self-defense — they are their own life-saving resource.

PRINCIPLE 4: Self-defense is a life-affirming practice.
While the law frames self-defense as a specific act that occurs after and in response to another act, survivors describe self-defense as a practice that is stretched across time. Self-defense occurs before, during, and after the single act for which survivors are targeted for prosecution and includes all the strategies survivors use to try to de-escalate or escape violence before they use force. After they have been criminalized, survivors continue to defend themselves using an array of strategies: self-advocacy while in brutal contexts of incarceration; affirming the truth of their experience of violence even when it means continued punishment; fighting for clemency to secure release from prison and/or protection from being targeted by ICE; conducting legal research and working with advocates to make strategic legal decisions, including whether to go to trial or negotiate a plea deal; taking action to support their physical and emotional well-being; telling their stories on their own terms; and cultivating life-sustaining family and community support. As an ongoing practice, self-defense flags a form of feminist world-making that incorporates practices, relationalities, and systems of meaning that affirm survivors and their lives.

PRINCIPLE 5: Self-defense resists identity annihilation.
Domestic violence, sexual violence, and carceral violence attempt to obliterate survivors' sense of self. These forces of violence create what Mariame Kaba describes as a social structure in which there are "no selves to defend."[110] Stormy Ogden's description of her entry into prison resonates with this experience; she writes, "On the first day when we first get off the bus, we are no longer our own person; we belong to the state of California . . . We are stripped of our identity; names are replaced by numbers, and for us, the pride of being native is stripped down to being *Other*."[111] Tracy McCarter also recounts that, after her arrest, her booking and case numbers replaced her name, writing, "My very identity was an early casualty."[112] *DSD* contributors and other survivors also describe efforts to resist this violence of erasure. Cece McDonald asserts, "[This system] wanted me to delegitimize myself as a trans woman — and I was not taking that. As a trans woman — as a proud Black trans woman — I was not going to allow the system to delegitimize and hyper-sexualize and take my identity away from me."[113] Thus, self-defense may be imagined as both a defense and a recovery of a survivor's sense of self.

PRINCIPLE 6: Self-defense is collective defense.
Almost all of the survivors who contributed to the *DSD* report had experiences collaborating with grassroots participatory defense campaigns to advocate for their own and/or others' freedom through collective defense. As noted above, a defense campaign can mobilize large numbers of individuals and organizations to participate in the practice of defense, including signing petitions calling for survivors' freedom, organizing rallies, engaging in mass letter-writing to those in power and to the survivor, bringing strategic media attention to the case, facilitating community forums and vigils, fundraising for legal defense funds, and leading court watches.[114] These collective defense strategies create a powerful locus of mass support, connection, and political momentum for survivors who are isolated through incarceration, social stigma, and media distortions. Reflecting on the impact of her defense campaign, Wendy Howard recounts,

> I had so much community support. They did protests, news media coverage, and my family was a real voice. After I made bail, one of the friends that I wrote to said that she heard the bailiff saying they had never seen something like that ever happen. So, I attribute that to community support and community pressure.[115]

Organizing to defend self-defense, then, clarifies that the "self" and the "collective" are not necessarily oppositional concepts of being. Rather, both can emerge within a reciprocal relationship that makes freedom possible.

PRINCIPLE 7: Self-defense echoes and connects survivors across time and space.
Self-defense can be an act of faith that connects people to one another, which enables and expands freedom in unexpected ways. Participatory defense campaign efforts build on the body of self-defensive actions that the survivor has taken, which, in turn, creates a pathway for future survivors to fight for freedom. In discussion with Marissa Alexander, Tewkunzi Green shared how Alexander's release was pivotal to her own process of advocating for her freedom:

> I saw your case on CNN and when they said she's getting out, and I'm like, wow, that was so amazing that she got out. And then I was

> like, if she could do it, I definitely can. So you inspired me. . . . I've always been the type of person who would be embarrassed about what I'm about to say, I just crawl in my shell like a turtle. And I felt like that for years until when you came home. When you came home, you spoke your voice on CNN news and that pushed me even harder. I was doing all of my paralegal research. I sat in a room at night, I was up until three, four o'clock in the morning some nights, trying to write out things. I sent that all out in January and in the beginning of March, Rachel [White-Domain] and them came, and I was like, wow that didn't take long. So on that day, more people started getting involved. In the midst of that time, I was [also] seeing Ky's story, and that inspired me. Then I heard about Bresha's case and then it was like, okay, everybody had similar problems. So this is God telling me like, wake up. I'm giving you all the signs. So you need to get going and that's when I started doing the advocate work from the inside of the prison.[116]

Green's experience of hearing God through "hearing" about other survivors' fight for freedom resonates with the echoes between survivor defense campaigns, such as the refrain from Inez García's campaign: Inez will be free because Joan is free.[117] These testimonies teach us that survivor self-defense can enable the freedom of other survivors or, in the words of poet Gwendolyn Brooks, "We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond."[118]

PRINCIPLE 8: Abolition means that survivors' lives are essential.
The collective vision holds that no one would be targeted with violence and, consequently, no one would be forced to use violence to save their lives. Towards that end, survivor self-defense is an abolitionist ethic. It demands an end to domestic and sexual violence, anti-trans and anti-queer violence, and racial, economic, and carceral violence. Further, as *DSD* contributors insist, the end of this violence requires the transformation of a world that remains committed to these forms of violence. Survivor self-defense unfolds within the intersections of these forms of violence and exposes the interlocking structures of this violence. Therefore, survivors' lives are not incidental to abolition nor a reason to reject abolition; they are *central* to abolition. As a practice of refusal, self-defense reveals a core truth that, while these layered and intersecting forms of violence are pervasive and powerful, they are not *inevitable*.[119]

PRINCIPLE 9: Self-defense is a practice of freedom.
Assata Shakur teaches us that "it is our duty to fight for our freedom."[120] Contributors to the *DSD* report outline specific policy, legal, and political recommendations for transformative action that support the safety and freedom of survivors who act in self-defense, including those still behind bars. Survivor self-defense requires proactive and collaborative efforts to dismantle "perfect victim" paradigms and build stronger networks of care and connection on both sides of the bars and across them. In short, as Mary Shields asserts, "We absolutely stick together and fight it."[121] If survival itself is against the law — resistant to the law, oppositional to the law — then survivor self-defense, as a life-affirming ethic, can act as a corrosive to the carceral state. Survivor self-defense bolsters resistance to violence, insists on solidarity as a practice that is part of everyday life, demands a world in which freedom is abundant rather than exceptional, and, to quote *DSD* contributor Robbie Hall, allows survivors the space to breathe.[122]

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NOTES

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117. Thuma, *All Our Trials*, 38.
118. Gwendolyn Brooks, “Paul Robeson,” in *Blacks* (The David Company, 1987), 496.
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Carceral Collusions with "the Community": An Examination of Community-Based Juvenile Justice Reforms

KAYLA MARIE MARTENSEN

After decades of "get tough" policymaking, the United States has entered a moment of fractured reform. Policymakers and criminal justice reformers increasingly advocate for evidence-based alternatives to incarceration,[1] while activists push for decarceration and the reallocation of resources to community.[2] These changes have directed more energy, attention, and resources into community-based responses to "crime," reconfiguring the carceral landscape. Yet the trajectory is uneven: many jurisdictions have seen a resurgence of punitive politics and renewed investments in policing and incarceration, often reinforced by current federal priorities.[3] Taken together these contradictions have generated radical interdisciplinary interest in analyzing and understanding the evolving dynamics of this moment.

This reconfiguration of the carceral landscape is especially evident today with youth decarceration trends representing various community-based interventions that rely on public-private partnerships, leading to an increased reliance on community-based services, programming, and treatments.[4] These interventions, encompassing deflection, diversion, and alternative-to-incarceration programs, serve as enhancements and alternatives to traditional punishments. Today, such services are increasingly offered by a network of providers representing "the community," effectively creating a community-based service sector tasked with performing juvenile justice within communities. The "community-based service sector" refers to the public and private institutions that partner with the juvenile legal system to develop these community formations.[5] This sector uses both familiar and new penal welfare logics, such as therapeutic, trauma-informed, and rehabilitative approaches, which create a seemingly benevolent form of punishment.[6] I use benevolence not as a neutral descriptor of well-intentioned service,[7] but to describe a carceral strategy — a way of making punishment appear kinder, softer, and embedded in forms of social reproduction that ultimately sustain carceral logics.[8]

Abolition feminism offers the necessary analytic lens for this project, as it interrogates carceral expansion, particularly when it is motivated by such benevolent reforms aimed at "vulnerable and deserving groups" — i.e., women and children — which subsequently create harm for Black, Indigenous, and other women, children, and communities of color.[9] Thus, abolition feminism offers a necessary frame for this project, not only because abolition and feminism cannot be separated, but because abolition itself is made stronger through feminist analysis.[10] Within this framework, reforms that appear beneficial often function as false solutions, ultimately reinforcing the very structures they claim to change.[11] This is why it is increasingly urgent to keep an abolition feminist gaze on community-based reforms which predictably follow a reformist reform pattern — reforms that reinforce carceral institutions, as opposed to non-reformist reforms that work to reduce carceral power — pushing punishment further into the community rather than dismantling it.[12]

We are in a transitional moment marked by national criminal justice reform. Historically, such shifts occur during periods of state economic crises and times of counterinsurgency,[13] making these transitional moments ripe for abolitionist analysis in the pursuit of transformative possibilities.[14] As the state attempts to respond to calls for reform related to the 2020 uprisings and ongoing financial crises, abolition feminists continue to be vigilantly aware of the rebranding of carceral institutions.[15] Where the uptake of community-

based reforms has created institutional optimism and belief that the criminal justice system is capable of change, abolition feminists continue to embody the "analytical elasticity" to document the versatility of carcerality that is "all around us."[16]

"Reforms that appear beneficial often function as false solutions, ultimately reinforcing the very structures they claim to change.

Situated within abolition feminist thought, in this paper I explore the nuanced shift from youth incarceration to what I have termed the "carceral service industry" — an expanding yet homogenous sector of service providers in the community offering services to the juvenile legal system for youth at all stages of court contact. It presents a synopsis of findings and analysis from a larger project examining community-based reforms in Cook County, Illinois, including Chicago — a hub for both juvenile justice reform and abolitionist work. The paper is situated at the intersection of empirical evidence, theoretical analysis, and reflective summary. Following Erica Meiners' reminder that "moments of transition are opportunities to anticipate and to resist new forms of capture," I frame this project as contributing to movement assessment through a description of modern reforms.[17]

The data used in this paper specifically derive from semi-structured interviews (n=59) conducted between 2021–2022 with individuals working in the juvenile justice division and community-based service sector including probation officers, court actors, and service providers. This data was triangulated with document analysis of both public and noncirculating documents. Moreover, this paper draws on empirical evidence and observations from working in various contexts with court-involved youth and the juvenile legal system in Cook County, including volunteering, organizing, professional internships, nonprofit work, and academic research, all of which have shaped the theoretical lens with which I analyzed the data.[18]

This paper is structured to analyze three interconnected themes in the research. First, it outlines the shift from youth incarceration to community-based services in Cook County. Second, it examines how decarceration efforts resulted in the development of a carceral service industry that replicates the logic and practices of the juvenile legal system. This development represents a collusion — an entanglement between carceral institutions and community-based organizations under the guise of community-based reforms, which repackage punishment as service. Third, the paper critically interrogates representations of what the state and reformers invoke as "the community" in this collusion, questioning the authenticity and implications of such portrayals and the potential for cooptation of BIPOC community work. Here, I contrast genuine community as abolitionist politic — a set of relationships grounded in collective care and resistance that exist outside of and in opposition to carceral logics — with the way the carceral state invokes community as an instrument to extend carcerality into service provision, surveillance, and compliance.

I argue that the movement toward community-based services manifests as a carceral expansion into the community, where the service sector effectively extends the juvenile legal system's reach by taking on responsibilities traditionally associated with social reproduction, such as youth programming, supports, and basic services, under the terms and logics of carceral governance. This absorption is not neutral; rather, it reflects how institutions tasked with sustaining life are increasingly structured around surveillance, compliance, and punishment. Further, the framing of these interventions as "community-based" implies a benevolent approach, masking the punitive nature of these practices while threatening, and in some cases achieving, the coopting of BIPOC community work.

DECARCERATION IN CONTEXT

Since the 1970s, mass incarceration has structured criminal justice policy and shaped public beliefs about how to respond to "crime," especially through the expansion of prisons, policing, and punishment, with youth incarceration peaking in the mid 1990s.[19] In the 2010s, observers began to describe a tentative shift toward youth decarceration, marked by efforts to reduce the number of youth physically incarcerated by expanding community-based alternatives that often operate through partnerships between the criminal legal system and institutions of social reproduction.[20] Youth incarceration

has fallen by approximately 75 percent from its height, a decline that has driven the closure of numerous youth prisons.[21] For example, on June 30, 2023, California closed the last of its youth prisons, which held ten thousand young people at its height. The closure placed California alongside a handful of states that have eliminated youth prisons altogether, reflecting a national decarceration trend.[22] As youth prisons continue to come under controversy because of their high costs and inhumane conditions,[23] there is an increased interest in small, local, community-based facilities.[24] Despite these shifts, the US continues to disproportionately incarcerate youth at rates incomparable to the rest of the world.[25]

National decarceration efforts have increased diversions and alternatives to incarceration, such as electronic monitoring, reporting centers, enhanced probation, problem-solving courts, and community treatment, including mandated mental health services, drug programming, and family services.[26] These community-based options are often conditions for probation and parole. Since 1980, the number of people on probation in the US has doubled, and the number of people on parole has tripled.[27] Community corrections are said by proponents to be cost-effective community-based alternatives that reduce the harms of confinement, yet these measures have done little to minimize court contact.[28] Further, the harms enacted on people who are in diversion, or alternative programs, have proven to be degrading, harmful, and stigmatizing.[29]

The juvenile legal system has also increased the use of various services in the community, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, various family-focused therapy models, mentoring programs, restorative justice, and wraparound programming as alternatives to incarceration. This trend has led to what some have dubbed a "revolution" in juvenile justice,[30] while others have argued the "community-based reform movement" only delegates the work of youth punishment and surveillance to service agencies,[31] making inconspicuous the harm of these benevolent community-based reforms.[32] The latter view aligns with the cyclical history of juvenile justice that moves between harsh and lenient ideologies,[33] historically influenced by a "child saving" logic which justifies punitive interventions in the lives of disenfranchised youth and their families under the guise of protection and social welfare.[34]

While reforms portray the community as a benevolent and nonpunitive site of corrections, research on community-based corrections and surveillance shows that "the community" often refers to networks of social and human service providers with long-standing ties to racialized punishment. Nonprofits and other nongovernmental agencies become conduits conveying carcerality into the community through a process of carceral devolution,[35] wherein the only "imaginable alternative to mass incarceration" is shifting people from prisons to the community and nonprofit organizations that reinforce neoliberal carcerality.[36] This shift creates both a geographical and conceptual transfer of carcerality, where individuals must learn to "correct" their behaviors in the community, despite structural circumstances, under the supervision of a service provider who is in turn under the surveillance of the court.

The criminal legal system has thus created new appendages in "therapeutic," "rehabilitative," and "community" forms presented as alternatives (or enhancements) to traditional punishments. These appendages are embedded in the community through various "self-help" services. Whether or not people want or feel they need intervention in their lives, they can be pressured to accept these alternatives for fear of harsher punishment, foregoing their due process rights, resulting in both predictable and unforeseen consequences.[37] These conditions have led to growing criticism that such reforms are merely evolving the racialized carceral state into a new form.[38]

FINDINGS

In what follows, I provide a synopsis of findings from research on community-based reforms in Cook County comprising part of a broader decarceration trend. Here I broadly summarize the findings from my research to offer timely information for movement assessment while also observing how energy, resources, and time are being used at this crucial moment when the state, academics, and activists are all grappling with undoing mass incarceration.

YOUTH DECARCERATION IN COOK COUNTY

Youth decarceration initiatives in Cook County over the last decade have been associated with budget constraints,[39] criticisms of inhumane conditions,[40] and, according to participants in this study, a "culture shift" in the juvenile legal system, resulting in declining

incarceration rates in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC) along with other confining institutions.[41] When the population at JTDC surpassed the facility's capacity, there appeared to be an urgency by the juvenile justice division to decrease the number of youth confined there.[42] In 2015, JTDC launched various decarceration initiatives including revised risk assessments, implementation of probation units to expedite custody decisions, and increased use of alternatives to detention.[43] In 2016, 47 percent of youth were kept out of custody, and 29 percent received expedited release.[44] Of these youth, 2,847 were placed on electronic monitoring as an alternative to detention, 885 youth were released to evening reporting centers, and a smaller unlisted number were sent to a staff secure shelter established as an alternative to JTDC.[45]

These changes occurred alongside policy and leadership shifts, such as adopting restorative justice bills in Cook County (2015–2016) and the 2016 election of Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx, who advocated for criminal justice reform.[46] This combination of factors led to fewer petitions filed by the state's attorney, more community-based programs, and "immense pressure by the state's attorney office on the judiciary to not hold kids in custody."[47] National legislative shifts paralleled local policy changes, such as deinstitutionalizing status offenses, anti-trafficking legislation, and developing pre- and post-confinement services, ultimately decreasing youth incarceration rates while increasing community-based alternatives. According to court actors interviewed in this work, these changes in policy and practice were supported by an overall culture shift in the juvenile legal system, moving away from harsh punishment and toward restorative justice and trauma-informed practices.

THE BUILDUP OF THE CARCERAL SERVICE INDUSTRY

In Cook County, the strategy to move away from incarceration and toward the community involved building an assemblage of services in the community to offer programming as an alternative to, or in combination with, other mechanisms of incarceration.[48] These services became tools for juvenile probation, replicating surveillance and detention on behalf of the courts.[49] The increased use of community-based services created a relatively homogenous sector of providers delivering interventions imposed on youth under court control — whether through diversion, probation, or pre-trial supervision.

According to a probation deputy, the Department of Probation and Court Services put a "call to the community" to partner in developing a "resource menu" of services for probation officers to refer youth and avoid "kids sitting in detention" because there is "nothing in the community."[50] They shared, "We saw the ramp up of community embracing these young people . . . they're like, 'Hey, we can do this, pay us,' so we contracted with them, and they started building their capacity to become big power wigs in the community."[51] Here there is a representation of community that is less about autonomy, liberation, or safety, and more about moving so-called juvenile justice into the community under conditions of court surveillance, compliance, and control.[52] What the Cook County case reveals is what I call the buildup of the carceral service industry — orchestrated by the juvenile legal system, maintained by influential community arbiters who serve as stewards to resources, and access, and composed of a growing number of service providers often competing for space and funding in the industry.[53]

There are two things fundamental to the carceral service industry. Firstly, in replicating carcerality in the community, service providers indicate various levels of involvement and comfort with carcerality, including managing probation conditions, court advocacy, and reporting youth progress and participation to the courts.[54] Where some service providers shared discontent with their proximity to the carceral state, other providers nearly replicate the very practice of court surveillance alongside the courts. One service provider expressed,

> If a youth is mandated to participate in services [with us], then that's where we kind of step in, assess the kid and their family, and we say, "Okay, these are the services needed," we come up with a treatment plan, we identify what that would look like, and then, we would report [youth and family] compliance directly back to the court.[55]

In this case, juvenile probation conducted an assessment to make recommendations for service, and the judge ordered the young person to comply with a service provider in the form of a court order. The provider then conducted their own assessments, often using the same or similar tools as probation, created their own order in the form of a treatment plan with obligations and objectives for the service period, and reports compliance back to the court — effectively "doubling-down" on carcerality.

Secondly, the collusion between the juvenile courts and community service providers has given way to emerging formations

developed as deflection, diversion, pre-trial, and various other alternative programming. These formations, too, replicate carceral practices, i.e., surveillance, control, and detention. One supervisor for a diversion program illustrates the level of surveillance when they shared,

> Our goal as a team is to be in the field, at [the] family home, in the community, meeting them at appointments ...going to an intake appointment, so that we really do see what's going on...Let's get a release on file for your therapist, and let's invite that therapist to the individual care team meeting.[56]

In this program, a coordinator with a social work background will do the same work as a probation officer, verbatim. To further complicate things, some youth diverted into these programs still have a probation officer supervising the diversion. This dynamic illustrates the collusion between the juvenile legal system and community-based service providers. Collusion captures the intentional ways the courts coopt community logics and how, as a result, service providers participate in the expansion of carceral practices. This framing is fundamentally rooted in abolition feminism, which interrogates the blurred boundary between carceral and seemingly non-carceral formations.[57]

“ Collusion captures the intentional ways the courts coopt community logics and how, as a result, service providers participate in the expansion of carceral practices.

Even as Cook County decreases the number of youth arrests, prosecutions, and incarceration, young people continue to be drawn under the surveillance of the juvenile legal system through alternative mechanisms, which extend court authority into community-based services. These emerging formations take over the role of traditional carceral institutions by engaging in nearly identical practices. Instead of diverting youth from the courts, these programs create new formations while producing another arm of the carceral state, this time inside the community.

COOPTING COMMUNITY

State-aligned ideas of community are often infused with a sense of benevolence framed as care, safety, and investment in youth, a sense that allows carceral logics to take hold in ways that feel supportive rather than punitive. Carcerality, then, becomes harder to name or resist, even as it quietly seeps into everyday life through these services. Although carcerality is less visible when situated in the community, a small subset of service provider participants (n=14) in the study critically observed the impact carcerality has on community:

> I always hear people say, again, “systems people language,” “connect to community,” “we need them in community,” “we need community partners,” “community staples,” and “we need community service,” whatever it is, community, community, community. Then, what does that mean?[58]

Participants criticized the state's refusal to allow local residents to represent themselves, instead relying on outside foundations and partners who were socially and geographically removed from the neighborhoods they claimed to represent and co-opting the language of community. In some of Chicago's most divested neighborhoods, empty lots and buildings routinely become new locations for service providers. One participant shared a quote from a young person affected by this situation: “It's a thousand nonprofits in a 4-block radius, and they're territorial.”[59] Participants expressed concern about a drastic and sudden increase in service providers. Local residents are concerned about the physical presence of community-based services and the problematic ways these organizations use their geographic proximity to represent them, including a means to accrue these organizations' own social and financial capital. The community members' concern is heightened by what they see as social stratification between service providers, who are focused on advancing their organizations or careers, and the youth they claim to represent, who are simply “trying to survive.”[60]

There is also a cultural cooptation underway which service providers identify, albeit often indirectly. In 2020, against the backdrop of widespread protest and heightened national attention to systemic racism, service providers recognized a “racial equity” shift in the industry, which translated into funding Black- and Brown-led community organizations. One participant shared, “I've been told by organizations that they love our work, [but] they won't fund it now because of the [white] leadership of [our] organization.”[61] By

involving Black- and Brown-led organizations in carceral service work, the juvenile courts effectively coopt community efforts and position themselves as agents of community engagement. As one former service provider reflected about their organization, "What's interesting is that [the organization] originated in Black and Native Indigeneity — like, this is how we connect as oppressed people. The bigger [the organization] got, the less it became about spiritual transformation, and more about, 'You need to be in college, and you need to be a good worker.'"[62] This reflection illustrates how carceral service work can shift the mission of community organizations, replacing liberatory goals with outcomes aligned with court mandates and neoliberal expectations of productivity and compliance. The expansion of carcerality into communities, coupled with what some identify as a performative investment in Black- and Brown-led organizations, creates a "brother's keeper effect."[63]

The juvenile courts' infiltration into communities through the carceral service industry has generated deep contention. To counter criticism of outside organizations leveraging their proximity to "represent" neighborhoods, both funders and the courts have begun to prioritize Black- and Brown-led organizations and community members. In practice, however, this shift often results in cooptation: community-rooted organizations are absorbed into carceral agendas, their missions reshaped to align with court mandates and funder expectations. These findings therefore indicate not a genuine shift to community, but an extraction — an extraction from the community, an extraction of space, an extraction of culture, and an extraction of experience and story.

DISCUSSION

Observations of decarceration and community-based reforms through an abolition feminist lens reveal that these efforts follow predictable and cyclical patterns of reformist juvenile justice reform, which historically have led to new forms of carceral control. In this context, proclaimed "lenient" treatment is delivered through services, programs, and treatments provided by the carceral service industry, which takes on the ideological role of punishment via surveillance, control, and detention in collusion with the juvenile courts.[64] As carcerality is reproduced within the community, this paper supports the view that the carceral state is not shrinking but instead shifting to embed itself in community spaces (usually associated with social reproduction) in the name of decarceration.

These findings align with a broader neoliberal trend in the juvenile legal system where service providers have become central to administering juvenile justice without enacting structural change,[65] instead adopting deficit-based practices that emphasize individual responsibility while reinforcing a cultural ethos that dismisses the legacy of racialized, colonial, and ableist punishment against BIPOC.[66] Through community-based reforms, we see a performative investment in social welfare in the form of services — and yet, as one participant shared, "It's not a resource desert if there's a ton of nonprofits, right? But it's still a resource desert."[67] This increase in service providers creates an illusion of investment; yet services, even if helpful, are not in themselves generative resources. Material conditions such as safety, housing, and income, which sustain life over time, are resources that services cannot replace.[68] These reforms fail to address structural inequities — above all, the defunding of social welfare and the criminalization of poverty — that result from neoliberal racial capitalism.[69]

These findings suggest that community-based juvenile justice reforms in Cook County represent a reformist reform, one that operates through the carceral service industry. Reformist reforms make incremental changes within an existing system without fundamentally challenging its core principles or structures; they focus on improving specific aspects of systems while preserving its overall framework.[70] Community-based reforms exemplify reformist reforms in maintaining public/private partnerships to contract services that replicate conditions of imprisonment, ultimately legitimizing the juvenile legal system while expanding its reach.[71] Although community-based reforms have reduced the number of youth in physical confinement, they have also produced new forms of confinement in the community. Service providers now enact surveillance, control, and temporary detention, while youth are coerced into accepting diversion "opportunities" under the threat of harsher punishment. In this way, the community-based service sector becomes another apparatus willing to take on the "ideological work" of the carceral state while supporting a rebranding of juvenile justice during another moment of economic crisis and social turmoil.[72]

CONCLUSION

We are in a critical moment of transition where, for the first time in over half a century, economic and social shifts are steering us away from relying on mass incarceration as the primary means of enforcing racialized punishment in the US.[73] However, the findings discussed in this paper indicate a long-standing pattern of reformist reforms in juvenile justice, making the implications of this work profound. These reforms manifest as a carceral expansion into community, extending the juvenile legal system's influence and risking the cooptation of community. This analysis pushes us to consider how these patterns inform both the limits of reform and the possibilities for abolitionist practice.

First, in this transitional moment, abolitionist movements can draw on the history of reformist reforms to influence the trajectory of contemporary ones. As the carceral state follows predictable patterns that have created harm, the momentum of the current moment offers space to impede the cycle of reformist reforms. Second, this momentum creates opportunities to push reforms in directions that resist cooptation. One such opportunity is to disengage juvenile courts from their role as gatekeepers to community services, reducing the court's capacity to define access. It is also vital to direct current investments in Black and Brown communities toward strengthening grassroots movements and ensuring funding supports BIPOC community work without imposing conditions aligned with carceral logic. Finally, rather than reproducing deficit-based service models that mandate therapy as a default, reforms should confront structural inequities and state violence as the conditions that shape youth involvement in the system.

The patterns described here also mirror a broader dynamic. As abolition becomes more visible, it too risks being absorbed into carceral logics through cooptation and institutionalization. As Rachel Herzing argues, abolition is practical only when rooted in ongoing organizing rather than symbolic gestures.[74] Yet, as we have already seen with the co-optation of restorative justice practices, there is a risk that abolitionist practices may be institutionalized in ways that strip them of their transformative power.[75] Dean Spade warns that funders' embrace of "transformative justice and community accountability," tools of abolition, can amount to containment rather than liberation.[76] It is crucial for abolitionist movements to remain vigilant about continued attempts to redirect community efforts into carceral logics.

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NOTES

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2. Sam Levin, “These U.S. Cities Defunded Police: ‘We’re Transferring Money to the Community,’” *The Guardian*, March 11, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/07/us-cities-defund-police-transferring-money-community.
3. Brianna Seid, “Project 2025’s Plan for Criminal Justice Under Trump,” *Brennan Center for Justice*, January 29, 2025, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/project-2025s-plan-criminal-justice-under-trump.
4. Kayla M. Martensen, “Prison Is Not Feminist, Service Is Not Liberation,” in *Abolition Feminisms Vol. 2: Feminist Ruptures against the Carceral State*, ed. Alisa Bierria, Brooke Lober, and Jakeya Caruthers (Haymarket Books, 2022).
5. Social services, human services, education, medicine, foundations, and the nonprofits that make up this sector have long histories of racialized violence against communities of color. Here, “community-based” is not used to soften those harms, but to underscore how the carceral state enlists other institutions under the guise of “community” — a dynamic this paper critiques.
6. David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).
7. Participants don’t use the term “benevolence,” but they describe a culture shift away from harsh punishment toward kinder, therapeutic responses, like “trauma-informed care” (explored in a forthcoming paper) and the “community-based” interventions discussed here.
8. Rose Braz, “Kinder, Gentler, Gender Responsive Cages: Prison Expansion Is Not Prison Reform,” *Women, Girls, and Criminal Justice* 7, no. 6 (2006): 87–88; Martensen, “Prison Is Not Feminist.”
9. Benevolent approaches to punishment, often situated as acts of reform, have historically resulted in carceral expansion — where punitive logics, practices, and apparatuses proliferate beyond prisons. See Beth E Richie, “Carcerality,” in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (New York University Press, 2021), 40–43.
10. Angela Y. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, (Haymarket Books, 2022).
11. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*.
12. “Reformist reforms,” i.e., reforms that make incremental changes without fundamentally challenging the core principles and practices of carcerality, giving more power, resources, and money to the system being reformed, as argued by Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie in *No More Police: A Case for Abolition* (New York: The New Press, 2022). “Non-reformist reforms,” i.e., reforms that work to uproot the structure working toward larger transformation, as argued by André Gorz in “Reform and Revolution,” *The Socialist Register 5* (March 1968): 111–143.
13. On economic crises, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007); Marie Gottschalk, “Razing the Carceral State,” *Social Justice* 42, no. 2 (2015): 31–51. On counterinsurgency, see Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Doubleday, 1969); Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (University of California Press, 2016).
14. Erica R Meiners, *For the Children? Protecting Innocence in a Carceral State* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
15. Ren-yo Hwang, “Bad Apples, Rotted Roots, and the Three Rs of Reformist Reforms,” in *Abolition Feminisms Vol. 2: Feminist Ruptures against the Carceral State*, ed. Alisa Bierria, Brooke Lober, and Jakeya Caruthers (Haymarket Books, 2022).
16. Alisa Bierria, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober, “Introduction: Making a Clearing,” in *Abolition Feminisms Volume 2: Feminist Ruptures against the Carceral State* (Haymarket Books, 2022), 1; Richie, “Carcerality”; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Seven Stories Press, 2003), 18. See also Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays towards Liberation* (Verso Books, 2022).
17. Meiners, *For the Children?*, 19. Meiners continues “moments of transition are opportunities to anticipate and to resist new forms of capture. As select criminal laws and institutions are reformed, particularly those affecting young people, movement assessment is imperative.” I see this project on juvenile justice reforms as contributing to movement assessment.
18. Having grown up and lived in the Chicago area for decades, I witnessed this shift not only through formal roles but also in the everyday texture of community life shaped by carceral systems, all of which shaped the theoretical lens for which I analyzed the data.
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Collectivizing Care and Making Kin as Abolitionist Practice

STEVIE WILSON

WITH EMILY THUMA

Stevie Wilson is an imprisoned Black, queer, abolitionist organizer and multi-genre writer from Philadelphia. His work interrogates the meanings of freedom, community, belonging, identity, and truth. Wilson has published numerous articles in print and online. His most recent work appears in Radical History Review, *the* Journal of American History, *and the collection* After Accountability: A Critical Genealogy of a Concept. *He was a 2024 recipient of the Writing Freedom Fellowship by Haymarket Books.*

In October 2024, Wilson spoke with special issue guest co-editor Emily Thuma about how and why kinship-building and collective care work are foundational to prison-industrial complex (PIC) abolition. This conversation has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

EMILY THUMA: I understand that you're working on a book of essays on HIV/AIDS and kinship, based on the many years you spent working in HIV/AIDS services. I also read that prison guards destroyed your manuscript, and so you are presently reconstructing the collection. Could you share a bit about this project — its central themes and ideas? How has your work around HIV/AIDS shaped your work around PIC abolition and vice versa?

STEVIE WILSON: I never intended to write a collection. I was journaling as a way of meaning-making, making sense out of what I had been through. I was recently incarcerated and had time. I had been through a lot, and I didn't have anyone around me I could speak to about these issues. And so, these were actually notes at first. I would think about certain things that had happened and write them down. The notes became long form journal entries that I then expanded into essays. These journal entries were my own way of healing, understanding what had happened to me, what happened to my community. I think it's very important that we figure out what happened, why did that happen, what was going on. And when you get those answers, they help you move onto the path of healing.

Some of the essays took longer to write than others. The one about my father, for example, took eight years to write, because it was such an emotional piece that I sometimes needed to take a break from the revisiting I was doing. The word "essay" means to try, and when you're in the trying of sense-making, of meaning-making, you discover new things. I was making connections as I wrote that would bring me back to the beginning again. As I began to write more, I found myself crossing the same terrain as far as the themes: identity, truth, kinship, Blackness, queerness, memory. Although I didn't go in trying to explore these particular themes, every single piece wound up touching back on those areas. When thinking about Blackness, for example, I was working through what it meant that oftentimes when I saw Black people I didn't see all my little hyphens represented. That's how we get to identity. I hadn't ever walked into a space that could hold all of me. Every time I walked into a room, there was some part of my identity that I had to leave at the door in order to enter. I had been searching for a space I could call home, into which I could bring all of myself, and not feel embarrassed or make excuses for bringing all of myself. The essay collection became a space where all of me could be there.

“There are certain principles in abolition: meeting people where they are, the radical yes, no one is disposable, making something out of nothing, being innovative. Improvising. These are all things that we had to do as a Ballroom community, and that we still do today as part of the community.

I had written a total of eight essays before they were destroyed by a prison guard in 2021. I had carried the essays with me — smuggled them, actually — from the county jail up to the state prison system in 2013. In Pennsylvania you're not supposed to have any paper with you but legal paperwork, and so I had printed out some case law and copied the essays on the back so that it looked like legal paperwork when the officers checked it. I then carried them from prison to prison to prison — Graterford, Rockview, Smithfield — until they were destroyed at Fayette in 2021. It was so devastating. So much time had gone into them, and I had been carrying this stuff with me for over a decade.

As far as how my work around HIV/AIDS and in PIC abolition have informed each other, PIC abolition helped me understand my orientation toward the state. When I was out in the community, I knew the state's position towards me. As a Black queer person in Black and Brown queer and trans community, I knew how the state felt about me. I knew that they were not going to help me. I knew that they didn't think I should exist. I knew that I could never look to the state to do right by me. That they were my antagonist. But I didn't know my position towards the state — I knew how they felt about me, but I didn't know what I felt about them. And that's why we find ourselves constantly begging the state to accept us and begging the state to do this for us and do that for us. It's like, wait a minute. What should my position be? And that's what abolition gave me. So as I'm doing the work out in the AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs), I understand they're not going to do shit for us; we have to do for ourselves. They don't care about us. And so we just did the work as far as helping each other survive in whichever way we had to. There are certain principles in abolition: meeting people where they are, the radical yes, no one is disposable, making something out of nothing, being innovative. Improvising. These are all things that we had to do as a Ballroom community, and that we still do today as part of the community.

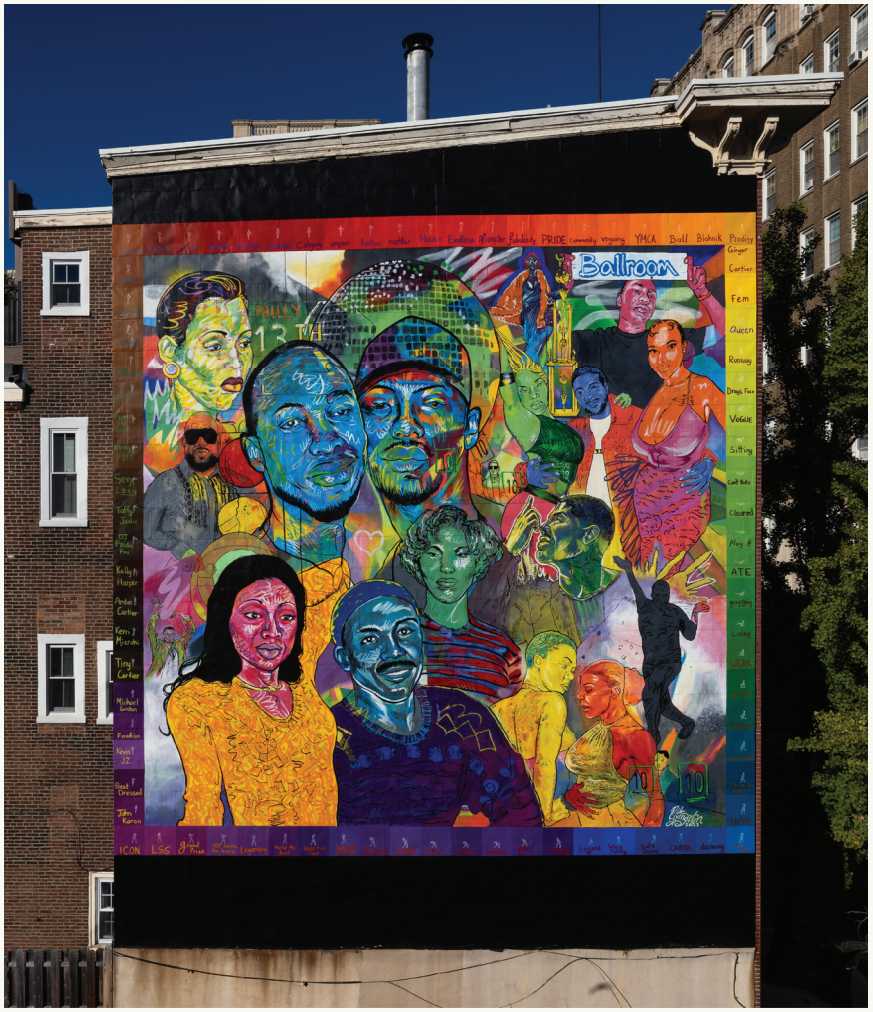
Studying abolition, and being in relationship and community with abolitionists, taught me my position towards the state. It was really perspective-shifting for me, reading books like *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and *Golden Gulag*, and materials on transformative justice that Mia Mingus sent me, and being in conversation with people like Jason Lydon (founder of Black & Pink) and Charlotte Pope (Critical Resistance, New York City).[1] Before encountering abolition I had been conditioned to believe that you seek safety through the state and through biological family. And when I really looked at my life and got honest about it, I realized that both of those sites had been sites of suffering for me, and that the state was never going to keep me safe.

Abolition oriented me to look other places and see how safety was being produced, and care was happening, in my communities. We can actually remedy harm, and prevent harm, without going to the police. And I also realized that although I had never *heard* of transformative justice before, I had *seen* it before. On the ballroom scene, we don't turn to the police. You had to work things out without going to the police. We didn't have the option of calling the police because when you did, you were possibly subjecting yourself to state violence. And I will give you an example. One time I was in West Philadelphia and there was a situation taking place that was possibly involving gun violence. A Black trans woman called the police for help, and when they arrived, the two cishet males who were the perpetrators of the harm told the police that she was trans. After that, the police wouldn't take her seriously, and nothing happened to these men. Her life was devalued by the state, and the police left her open to violence. And I witnessed this myself. So we know that when calling the police in, whatever threat you're already trying to repel or harm you're trying to avoid, you are actually opening yourself up to more harm. So what happens is we turn to our house members to help resolve an issue — this is where the Ballroom kinship network comes into play. You have the mother, father, and the uncles and aunts that younger people can turn to and share what's going on, and these house members can step in and intervene. If someone stole something from you, you've got to go to that person and get it back. No one has to put their hands on you, you're not getting kicked

off the block, but we don't do that here. Going to the police and getting that person locked up doesn't benefit anyone. It's the same in prison. We live on this block, we're confined on this block together, and we have to find a way to live with each other and work with each other every single day. As an incarcerated person, a person on the Ballroom scene, and as a Black person, this is just what we did and what we do — I come from a lineage. I now see abolitionist practices and experiments that happened in the Ballroom community that I didn't recognize as abolitionist when I was out there. So the experience was actually already there, and then the language came through study.

Abolition gave me a language as far as what happened to me and what happened to my community, which then created a space for me to be able to heal and to make sense of what took place. In one of the essays in my collection, for example, I talk about how downtown Philadelphia was gentrified. And when you see gentrification, you're going to see policing. What they did to Black and Brown queer and trans folk in Philadelphia — policing us, labeling everyone that was down there "a prostitute or a drug dealer," locking everybody up, assaulting people — it was just running us out of the area. It's so amazing, they call it the gayborhood now, and it was never there before until all of these little shops popped up and they ran us out. So we were seeing it happen in real time but we had no language for what was going on. I didn't know what broken windows policing was. I didn't know what neoliberalism was. I just knew that the public space, the public Black and Brown queer and trans space was being shrunken and destroyed. We were being erased. I knew it, but I didn't know why and who was responsible for that. So if I don't understand what's happening, I really can't fight against it. And then the pain and the suffering that I'm going through most likely is going to turn to lateral violence. And that's why it's so important to do the political education work in the community, because then we get answers — "Oh, that's why, that's what's going on, and this is who's responsible" — and then we know who the real enemy is, and who your allies, or potential allies, are . . .

I wrote a piece years ago about being a child and being sexually violated as a child and not having the language to articulate what happened to me. In that piece, I was talking about that language because I was about four and a half, almost five, and had been sexually victimized for almost six months by a live-in babysitter,



FINALLY ON 13TH MURAL HONORING THE PHILADELPHIA BALLROOM COMMUNITY. PAINTED BY NILÉ LIVINGSTON. PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE WEINIK.

actually. Terrorized by this person. I told my mother, "Kaselle is touching me." My mother thought that I was saying she was hitting me and so she went to her and said, do not hit my child. If he does something wrong, just come back and tell me. I'll correct him. This only inflamed the abuser. And so for a while, it got even worse, until it ended. Reflecting back, I didn't have the language to tell my mother what was happening to me. And so this is why, for me, language is so important because there were many times in my life when I had been in pain, I had been suffering, and I didn't have the words to articulate what I was doing or going through. And for me, that caused me to think about self-harm and harming others. And so I really think it's very important — once again, why the political education is so important — that we give people this language so they can speak about what's happening, talk about what's happening. They can make sense of their experiences. Because this is a path to healing. This is a path to building community and building real relationships. So for me, language was critical for getting to where I am today. If I didn't have these words, then like bell hooks said, I felt mind-fucked. I just knew that something was wrong and I didn't know what the hell was going on, or why it was happening. And the language is what really helped me heal. Abolition gave me that language. I was like, "oh shit." I was reading and saw: "that's what happened to us! That's what's going on! *That's* what happened. That's what they call it?"

Another way in which I think both the Ballroom community and PIC abolition have mutually informed each other for me is that the Ballroom community taught me that you have to center everything in relationship. And that's something that we emphasize in abolitionist work. But I don't know if people really do it like we should. Right now, when I think about imprisoned people, how many people on the outside have direct relationships with people inside the prison? I'm not talking about family members who went to prison. I'm talking about: did you make an intentional effort to be directly connected to people inside? How can we talk about being partners with people we don't have a relationship with? How can we talk about, "I'm really concerned about this person" if there's no relationship with this person at all, if you don't even know what they're going through. And so I think that we talk about it a lot in abolitionist work, but in the Ballroom community I saw every day how important the relationships were, being able to depend upon each other, being there for each other, helping people survive however they need to survive — not just an ally, but even an accomplice. In abolitionist work, we talk about relationships but I don't see people being intentional about relationship building with people who are inside, with imprisoned people. And that's something we need to step up on.

"So I always say that care work is the work that makes the work possible. You can't do the work without a relationship. I cannot sit down or call people to come sit with me and talk about these issues when they're struggling to survive.

ET: You are a founder and organizer of 9971, a network of prisoner-led abolitionist study groups in Pennsylvania. You're also a regular columnist for Critical Resistance's long running inside-outside newspaper, *The Abolitionist*, as well as a founder of the recently launched abolitionist publication, *In the Belly*. All three of these projects are examples of what you refer to as "mutual political education." In what ways do you see mutual political education as a practice of radical care?

SW: First of all, I think that you can't do the work without care. So I always say that care work is the work that makes the work possible. You can't do the work without a relationship. I cannot sit down or call people to come sit with me and talk about these issues when they're struggling to survive. If I do the care work, meeting the material needs of the people — this enables the work. To me, care work is grounded in helping people survive and getting to a place where they can thrive. Care work is also the emotional work where I am listening to someone, when someone is going through something. Remember how I said I was in prison and I didn't have anyone to talk to and I was writing in my journal. People have things they want to talk about. People are going through things every single day here. And so being that ear and listening — that's part of care work, just listening. I don't have to have an answer. People just want to be heard — especially people in here. And so that's part of it.

I always tell people that I can't do political education without mutual aid; these things are connected. And so the care work is necessary for me to get to a point where I can practice mutual political education. It's not just a theory or concept. For example, I'm doing this gun violence roundtable. Now, I have never authored gun violence. I've never experienced it personally. I've witnessed it, but I've never experienced it. And so I'm talking to a bunch of young Black men who have experienced, witnessed, and authored gun violence. And I have to sit down. When I say mutual political education, they're teaching me also. They are teaching me and giving me a language to understand certain things, and answering questions that I had. I didn't know this. I didn't know that. How was this? Why is that? And so I'm giving them something, which is the space to be able to talk. I'm facilitating the discussion. I'm also giving them language to put to their experiences, but they're also doing the same thing for me. They really are. I'm just blown away by these young men and how much they've been teaching me. And I always articulate to people that, yo, you have to come in as an organizer, not just ready to teach, but ready to learn, and to come in as a student. You have to be a noticer, and if you're going to notice things, you have to sit back and watch for a minute, make yourself available to help, and just check out what's going on.

And so, mutual political education is actually a practice. When you come into a setting, you are coming there as a student, even if you're facilitating this work. Mutual political education has an orientation. Too often, organizers and activists come onto the scene acting like they have all the solutions. They already know what's going on. People just need to listen to them: "we got the answers and know the way to do everything." All those people have to do is let them facilitate and guide them to the answer. If you're doing mutual political education, you don't have that attitude. You come already thinking that there's so much for me to learn here. And there's so much I need to just notice and pick up on. If you go to a Ballroom community, everyone who enters will tell you how we enter. You're just like, "Oh my God, there's so much to learn." We enter the scene, and there's a language that we're not used to. There are all of these different categories and ways that people talk to each other and relationships you have to learn. And so you come into this space knowing: I'm not here to tell you how to do anything. I'm here to learn from you. And if I'm going to be a part of this, I've got to learn. I got to sit back and be quiet and catch what's going on. And I think for me, maybe the Ballroom scene is where I got it from. I never enter a space like I have all the answers. I'm coming to learn. I'm coming to notice what's happening and then find out where I can be of assistance. And then whatever skills that I have that can help us reach that goal, I'm willing to do this. Whatever knowledge I may have that can help us understand and make meaning out of our experiences, I'm going to try to give it to you. But first I have to know your experiences, don't I? First, I have to know what was happening here. First, I have to know the relationships that already exist here. I have to know how you are surviving already. I think too many people come into a situation or into political education with the answers already. They come in thinking they know and they're there to guide people instead of saying, "I'm here to learn. Teach me." And that's why it becomes mutual — it goes both ways now.

ET: How do you think about the relationship between collective care labor — behind and across walls — and PIC abolition? What traditions of thought and praxis inform your thinking? Does the term "abolitionist care" resonate? If so, how?

SW: My practice is deeply influenced by Black anarchism. My practice is an extension of the work Martin Sostre did. My work has been influenced by Anakarta. Black anarchism has given me principles to return to the room to grow and extend the tradition itself. I think the term abolitionist care is redundant. I feel that abolition means you care. You're going to have to do care work. If you're an abolitionist, you should be doing care work. Care work is too often left on the shoulders of certain people. And I believe that we need to stop doing that because that's how people get burned out. I think that we need to be aware and intentional that when we do care work, that we actually spread that out. According to capacity. I think we also need to bake it into our work. I think too often we're so focused on the panel or the conference we're organizing, for example, but not focused on the care work that makes that panel or that conference possible. And that care work is left to certain groups of people. We don't really value care work on either side of the wall. Even behind the walls, the care work is done by the same people. And if

they don't do it, everything else falls apart. I find it tends to be very gendered. We need to be intentional about care work, and valuing it. And this is a major thing, a major issue.

I think we also need to understand that care work comes in many forms. And in here, for us, care work may be something as simple as feeding people. We are cooking meals and we're feeding each other. And we're making sure people have hygiene. And just being an ear sometimes for people. Sometimes somebody might not be good at writing letters, or writing requests, and just sitting down with them and helping them write this, or writing it for them. This is part of care work. It is the foundation of the political education and the movement building that we're doing. Because if I don't do this work, I can't get to the next level. I can't really sit down with this person and say, listen, "Oh, um, I want to talk to you about PIC abolition." They're like, what? I'm hungry.

We need to be intentional about care work. We need to value it, spread it out, do more of it, and recognize the many different ways it can happen. And according to our capacity, because everybody has different things they can do. But we need to be doing this. And if we do this, we will find that we will create more onramps for people to be involved in the actual work – whether it's the political education, whether it's being at a panel or a conference or at a rally or a protest or some direct action. More people could be involved If we invest more in care work. They can be.

We also need to recognize what isn't care work. We have prisons creating programs around "care." The motto of the corrections union in Pennsylvania is "Care, Custody, and Control." They call it the three Cs. All care is not good care. We, as a movement, need to define what care is and what it isn't. If we say "housing," they will give us carceral shelters. We need to be specific in what our demands are. This is how we guard against cooptation.

ET: You wrote in a recent piece in *Inquest* about the ways that solitary confinement is a tool authorities use to "alienate and disconnect" imprisoned people from one another, and from their families and communities on the outside.[2] And as organizations you've worked with, such as Black & Pink and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, have long drawn attention to, queer and trans people are disproportionately subjected to solitary confinement, often under the rationale of "protecting" them from other imprisoned people. As the prison is an engine of family separation and kin-breaking, what is the relationship between kin-making and PIC abolition — particularly for queer and trans people?

SW: I think that kinship making is the counter to the PIC. And I said that in the Inquest piece — stay connected. Build these relationships. They want to isolate; they want to alienate so they can destroy. Kinship making is the antidote to that. Like we say: "What is the antidote to harm? Care." And this is so beautiful with queer and trans folk behind the wall. You can be on one side of the compound. I can be on the other side of the compound. We spot each other. Automatically, we kin. "What's going on?" We talk to each other. It is really beautiful in the face of all that's happening. To have other people who see you and value you. It is so very important.

"I think kinship making is the counter to the PIC. . . They want to isolate; they want to alienate so they can destroy. Kinship making is the antidote to that.

There is a publication that comes out in Pennsylvania called *Hearts on a Wire*. And it does a lot of what Black & Pink does as far as sharing the letters from different people around the country — queer and trans folk who are incarcerated. I just love reading *Hearts on a Wire* because 80 percent of it is queer and trans folk just shouting out other queer and trans folk where they are and in other Pennsylvania prisons, letting people know this is where I am, this is going on with me, shout out to so-and-so, I miss you, don't do that, this is what's happening here. It really is amazing. And so if you read it, you will see how — my brother so-and-so, or my sister this and that, my son this, my daughter so-and-so, my other kings and queens — it's a family. Even though we are separated, spread out across Pennsylvania, we are family. And when you are family, when I say this person is my family member — whether I was in a Ballroom team out there in the House of Prodigy or I'm in here — when you say this is your family member, that means you have a bond with

them that is unbreakable. Regardless of whatever happens, whatever we go through, we're still family. We may not like each other all the time. We may not get along all the time, but we're family. And that means I've got to be here for you and I'm going to stand with you. And that's what it means to us behind these walls, to have somebody that is there with you, an ally — more than that, an accomplice. And that's so important. And it's the same thing out there. When I'm in the Ballroom community, I have house brothers and sisters. I also have what we call gay or queer brothers and sisters who are people outside of my house. And throughout all these decades, they are still with me. They still love me. "What's going on? Tell my brother this-and-that, keep his head up, we love you, we miss you." And it's years later — someone I haven't seen in fifteen years, and they're still there. And so that's very important.

Hearts on a Wire also has a video visiting team. You don't have to go anywhere but your own house and you can sign up to visit somebody who is in prison — a queer or trans person in Pennsylvania in prison — and spend time with them, forty-five minutes on a Zoom visit talking about what's going on. Even committing to visiting a person twice a month through vide means so much to someone inside who's queer or trans who may be going through that period where people are trying to isolate them and alienate them. So I just think that finding all the different ways that we can — a mail night — be involved on a very personal level is so important. I'm thinking to myself that I've been in a lot of prisons in Pennsylvania. And — this is amazing — this past week three people came onto my block and I had been in different prisons with them. As soon as they saw me, they ran up to me and gave me a hug like, "Oh my God, what's going on? Oh my goodness!" And to me, it was a testament that they knew the work. They knew me. They built a relationship with me. I cared for them. And I'm like, "you need anything?" "Oh no, I don't need anything, but I know if I did you got me. Thank you so much."

I think when we say "kinship-making," or "kinship," it's so hard to really express to people what that means to me as a Black queer man who was on the Ballroom scene and how it translates in here. But anybody that I know to be queer in this facility, it's automatically like, I'm concerned about that person. Automatically I want to make sure you're okay. Because I know what it gives in here. I know how they want to isolate you, I know how they want to treat you, I know they want to destroy you. So know that you got me as your friend,

COVER OF *HEARTS ON A WIRE* NEWSLETTER, ISSUE 36, WINTER 2024.
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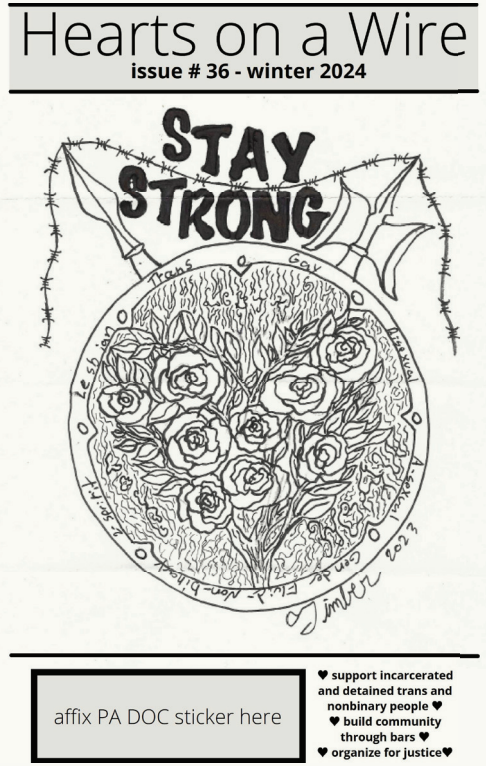

your partner, on this whole adventure, this whole journey. "I'm here with you. I got you. You need. I got you." I'm going to stand up with you and stand up for you. And so that's part of what kinship making is about behind the wall. I have been on blocks that were — when I was in the county jail — 50 percent queer and trans. And we were a community that was very strong. We went through stuff, but we stayed there for each other.

So I think kinship making starts in relationships. But it has this, I guess you would say, expectation that you're going to be there for me through thick and thin. And that's how it is. We may not get along all the time, but we're still going to be there for each other and support each other because that's how brothers and sisters are. You don't always get along. And so we say it and it really means something.

I can't walk away from these people. This is not how it goes. And I am concerned about everything that's happening in their lives. And so I think that this is something that quickly happens in the Ballroom community. But I'd like to see more of that happening in abolitionist circles, in abolitionist movement. More of that investment in the relationship and enough to feel like I can't walk away from this. When you think about yourself, the relationships where you say, I can't walk away from this relationship. I just couldn't cut this off. There's something you have with that person — that's where you begin the kinship making. We have made that commitment to be in this. So that's important.

NOTES

1. Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Seven Stories Press, 2003); Ruth Wilson Gilmore. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. (University of California Press, 2007).
2. Stephen Wilson, "Unsettled People," *The Inquest*, July 11, 2024, https://inquest.org/unsettled-people/.

COVER IMAGE: MOTHERS FOR ADEQUATE WELFARE PROTEST, BOSTON, 1966.
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