

**Love-as-Agency:
Challenges to Social Reproduction Feminism**

Candidate number: 1055969
MPhil in Political Theory

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MPhil in Politics in the
Department of Politics and International Relations at the
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ABSTRACT:

This paper responds to contemporary social reproduction theory (SRT) by refocusing the question of social reproduction's relation to capitalism in the context of racial capitalism and necropolitics, illustrating how systems of control, disappropriation, and death form the backdrop of reproduction in Black and brown, and marginalized communities. In doing so, I highlight important practices of life-making left out of the existing SRT literature, including political organizing and practices of transmitting and creating culture. I pay particular attention to the examples of reproductive labor by prisoners and abolitionists, drug users and anti-drug war activists, and within Black and Indigenous communities, concluding that there are reproductive labors which do not serve capitalist accumulation, and instead provide resistance to it.

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INTRODUCTION

“I see the Black mothers who are unseen...in this fury against their babies,” writes the artist Titus Kaphar in a poem accompanying his painting *Analogous Colors*.¹ In it, he depicts an anguished Black mother clinging to the empty space of a child whose figure the artist has literally cut from the canvas. The painting, which was created amidst a wave of nationwide protests for racial justice, references George Floyd’s cries for his mother before he was brutally murdered by four police officers. It is also one in a recent series depicting Black mothers in seemingly quotidian domestic acts—wheeling strollers, standing in a kitchen, braiding hair—except their children have been cut out of the picture, replaced by a stark white gap.

What does it mean to love and care for someone in a country where you and your kin are marked as disposable? What kinds of labor are necessary to counter death and violent oppression? In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the “care crisis” in America has received widespread national attention. Lack of childcare, struggling hospitals, and closed schools have restarted conversations around the fundamental work of sustaining life. As a result, social reproduction theory (SRT), which emerged out of feminist domestic labor debates in the late twentieth century, has seen a newfound resurgence. Social reproduction theorists like Silvia Federici and Nancy Fraser have been cited in national newspapers arguing that unpaid housework is a gendered form of capitalist exploitation; books and manifestos using social reproduction as an intellectual framework have proliferated in the past few years.² However, recent conversations on care often do not go far enough in addressing how race shapes the meanings and forms of reproductive labor in different communities, especially within a society structured by racial capitalism and disposability.

Social reproduction encapsulates all the capacities and processes necessary to reproduce and maintain human life—all the biological and cultural, physical and mental, daily and generational labor which creates and shapes people, communities, and our relationships. Katharyne Mitchell, Sallie Marston, and Cindi Katz simply say that “social reproduction is about how we live.”³ SRT explores the relationship between our life-making activities and capitalism, understood as not simply an economic system, but also the social order and background conditions enabling it. Mainstream social reproduction theorists acknowledge that race structures the social order, but elide deep analysis. Although communities of color have written urgently about love, care, and life-making work, and feminists of color have responded to the narrow focus of social reproduction feminists, these experiences and insights are often only superficially addressed.

Kaphar’s paintings, for example, ruminate on how difficult and fraught Black women’s care labor can be, not because of how many Black and brown women perform domestic labor for white families—the point usually made about race and care, if race is addressed—but how routine disaster in Black communities “crescendos in the disappearance of their Black children.”⁴ Kaphar implies that labors typically associated with raising a child are not enough to keep Black people alive amidst routine racialized violence. While Black communities are subject to some of the most systematic and egregious attacks on life, they are not the only ones who face such crises: the social reproduction of Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and various other marginalized groups, have been targeted and besieged throughout US history. These conditions, and how communities respond to them, have received mostly shallow attention in social reproduction theory.

¹ Kaphar, “Artist Titus Kaphar on His George Floyd TIME Cover.”

² See, for example a recent profile of Silvia Federici in the New York Times by Jordan Kisner, the *Feminism for the 99%* manifesto by Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, and interviews in leftist magazines like Dissent.

³ Mitchell, Marston, and Katz, “Introduction,” 416.

⁴ Urist, “Titus Kaphar | Essay | Studio Visit.”

One of the most prominent and fundamental arguments of SRT is that social reproduction exists in a *necessary yet contradictory* relationship with capitalist accumulation: on the one hand, reproduction sustains capitalism through maintaining and creating labor power; on the other, to maximize profits, capitalism must minimize the costs of reproduction, driving constraints on resources for life and the exploitation of domestic labor. Various contemporary feminists thus portray social reproduction as, ultimately, *essential* to the continuation of capitalism over the long-run. By birthing, raising, and caring for present and future workers, care work is inextricably bound in reproducing the means for its own subjugation.

Such a theory, however, masks that capitalist power dominates different communities in different ways—and that the kinds of care work performed in response to and despite this domination may not just be undesirable for capital, but also crucially *disruptive* to its logic and function. Likewise, caring labor may be constrained not because of a drive to maximize profits alone, but because it threatens the existing social order upon which capitalism depends by caring for those deemed undesirable, enacting care in anti-capitalist ways, or both.

Under racial capitalism, some reproductive labors are more desirable than others. American policies have historically elevated the reproduction of white families often directly at the expense of the reproduction of Black and brown ones. By centering and theorizing from the norm of the white, middle-class American family, social reproduction feminists have not gone far enough in probing the unique threats to and promises of social reproduction in a wide swath of communities. Their theories offer an incomplete portrait of how capitalist exploitation functions, the sphere of social reproduction itself, and the relationship between capitalism and reproduction.

I seek to remedy these blind spots in SRT in three main ways. First, I refocus the question of social reproduction's relation to capitalism in the context of racial capitalism and necropolitics, illustrating how systems of control, disappropriation, and death form the backdrop of social reproduction in marginalized communities. In doing so, I highlight important practices of life-making left out of the existing SRT literature. Taking an interdisciplinary perspective, I place SRT directly in dialogue with Black feminist literature, as well as Black and ethnic studies scholars outside of political theory, beyond the few Black political theorists that have been referenced as token acknowledgment by white feminist scholars.

Second, I theorize from the ground up, beginning with how people in communities who face acute oppression actually experience and conceptualize love, care, exploitation and resistance in their lives. Black feminists have long reiterated how marginalized people far from traditional academic spaces have experiences which reflect reality in unique ways, and also interpret that reality differently to offer distinctive insight. As bell hooks writes, theorizing is only “healing, liberatory, or revolutionary...when we ask that it do so,” and the kind of theory useful for understanding and countering oppression should engage with those whose perspectives are neglected within our society's power structures.⁵ Experiential knowledge can also better demonstrate how power operates in ways that are not visible from the perspective of preexisting academic theorization alone.

And lastly, these material experiences and perspectives also facilitate theorizing that holds real space for emancipatory possibility and world-making. Theory should both articulate alternative possible futures to existing regimes of injustice—and how we get there—and it should acknowledge those people and practices already bringing new potentialities into the world. To represent social reproductive labor universally as an unwitting accomplice to unshakeable capitalist power risks dismissing and undermining those who, at this moment, love and care precisely against capital and engage in prefigurative politics. In this, too, I draw on writers of color who have always understood the power of theorizing hope and change, and the necessity of illuminating possibilities for

⁵ hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” 2–3.

resistance. Within communities who, daily, face violent oppression, people are already performing social reproductive labor in ways that enact new social relations, redefine care and community outside of and against capitalism, and build alternative futures that hold life truly dear.

This paper proceeds in three parts.

Chapter 1 shows how race has remained consistently underexplored in SRT, and extends arguments made about social reproduction by people of color. It reviews the development of SRT from the late nineteenth century to the present-day, and presents some of the major arguments around the relationship between social reproduction and capitalism in contemporary feminist and critical theory. I also introduce critiques and perspectives on social reproduction from Black feminists across this same time period, and show how their analyses remain under-addressed.

I then argue for a broader understanding of what kinds of activities social reproduction includes. Although the term has most commonly connoted housework, or more recently institutions like daycares and hospitals, I illustrate how political organizing, making art, and passing down cultural traditions are crucially life-affirming labors, drawing on scholars like Bernice Reagon, Stanlie James, and Deva Woodly. Ultimately, I develop the argument that social reproduction in marginalized communities is an important sphere of resistance to capitalism unrepresented by the necessary-yet-contradictory relationship described in SRT. I close the chapter with a section on the importance of world-building and theorizing freedom, with my belief that both how we portray the possibilities for care as anti-capitalist resistance, and the actual existence of such resistant care practices, are crucial to building alternative futures.

Chapter 2 extends the argument that some types of social reproductive activity disrupt and resist racial capitalism especially in the context of necropolitics. Concentrated poverty, mass incarceration, drug epidemics and drug war violence are driven by racialized processes of disaccumulation in communities deemed surplus to capitalism. Whereas SRT focuses on how life is harnessed for labor exploitation, I focus on how the constriction of life to the point of death can directly facilitate predatory profit, while maintaining the social and political order upon which racial capitalism as a whole depends.

Against this background, care can directly contest capitalist logic and power. First, I look to the case of communities facing carceral systems, both literal imprisonment and the systematic disinvestment, predation, and surveillance faced especially by low-income Black people. I show how quotidian acts of what I call “intimate care” are political acts for prisoners and their loved ones, and how it forms a foundation for full-fledged anti-carceral political organizing—prison rebellions and movements for abolition—as a foundational expression of care. I draw on abolitionists like Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Jackie Wang, and Orisanmi Burton, as well as perspectives from prisoners and their families found in journalistic and academic work. Secondly, I turn to drug user activists, who have been rendered disposable by economic precarity, pharmaceutical profits, and the war on drugs. Rejecting this, drug user communities perform radical acts of mutual aid which save lives, defy laws, and provide people with human warmth, relationships, and identities. Care also crucially entails doing politics and building new worlds based off redefining community and care itself. Here, I draw on scholars like Jarrett Zigon, as well as journalism by Travis Lupick and Maia Szalavitz.

Chapter 3 turns to culture as an area of social reproduction, and acts of cultural transmission and production as reproductive labors that shape people’s political orientations and identities, enable physical and spiritual survival, and defy capitalist ways of being and knowing. I ask, how does change come into the world? I show how even commonly analyzed forms of reproductive labor, such as raising children, can be performed in culturally specific ways, imbued with political visions of freedom. In Black communities, critical thought and political protest are traditions passed between generations. Moreover, I position Black cultural activity—the creation of Black music, art, and literature—as reproductive labor that has helped Black communities survive in multiple ways. The

very formation and continuation of Black culture in a country intent on repressing it is itself a tradition of defiance, while also nurturing political resistance to oppression.

As a second example, I examine the cultural transmission of Indigenous peoples, a highly contested site of struggle against efforts to exterminate Indigenous culture by the US government. The genocide of Indigenous peoples is another horrific example of disposability and disappropriation, but here I focus on specifically the targeting of cultural reproduction: breaking Native relationships to land, removing children to assimilationist boarding schools, and incentives for urban relocation, among other policies. In this context, Indigenous peoples know all too well that cultural transmission and continuation are social reproductive acts: if culture is extinguished, bodies may still be biologically reproduced, but a people will be dead. Given this recognition, many people have taken on the labor of reviving and maintaining culture as their life's work. Meanwhile, such cultural revival today offers alternative ways of knowing, being, and relating to the world for Indigenous peoples, driving care as political action like #NoDAPL, and ways of being which combat capitalist accumulation and offer alternative political visions for the future.

Across all chapters, this paper endeavors to show the power and promise of love and care. While the length of this paper limits me to particularly prominent and poignant examples of social reproduction as resistance, how any individual makes the decision to resist racist, capitalist violence is formed by community and culture—by the labor of social reproduction. The phrase “love-as-agency” which titles and informs this paper, is drawn from the historian Robin D.G. Kelley’s framing of James Baldwin’s fierce love ethic, in which intimacy, care, and love provide the grounds for defiant affirmations of life and form the roots of revolutionary action. If we truly see social reproduction as the work which forms us and our relationships and sustains life, if we see love and care as more than its framing as “unwaged work” in the inception of SRT, then some acts of social reproduction can indeed destabilize rather than serve capitalism, and form the basis for imagining and creating freer future worlds.

CHAPTER 1: RACE AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY

I. *A Marxist-Feminist Analysis of Women's Work*

The concept of social reproduction emerged from the work of Marxist and socialist feminists, who sought to understand the place of women, and women's work, in capitalist society. SRT's fundamental insight is that capitalist exploitation simultaneously depends upon and seeks to minimize social reproduction. As early as the 1820s, Utopian socialists Anna Wheeler and William Thompson argued that gendered reproductive labor was essential to societal wealth, and thus, the capitalist system that competitively produces and distributes such wealth. While plenty of subsequent feminist writing attended to the oppressive nature of women's housework, Wheeler and Thompson's insights linking capitalism to reproduction were largely neglected for decades, with a political economic analysis of reproduction not revived until later in the twentieth century.

In the 1970s, a largely white group of Marxist feminists began protesting unwaged domestic and reproductive labor as a linchpin of both sexist oppression and capitalist production, showing how capitalism relied upon non-economic social relations to function. Sheila Rowbotham wrote about the contradictory relationship between production and reproduction, noting that "The family is both essential for capital's reproduction, and a brake on its use of human labour power."¹ For Rowbotham, work within the family occupied a separate sphere of production, one that both upheld patriarchal relations and indirectly kept capitalism alive, but offered potential for liberation. By contrast, Silvia Federici, one of the founders of the Wages for Housework movement, argued that housework actively maintained capitalism by sustaining its labor power:

...while it does not result in a wage for ourselves, [women] nevertheless produce the most precious product to appear on the capitalist market: labor power. Housework is much more than house cleaning. It is servicing the wage earners physically, emotionally, sexually...It is taking care of our children—the future workers...ensuring that they too perform in the ways expected of them under capitalism.²

Rowbotham, Federici, and other 1970s social reproduction feminists made important contributions: they highlighted the contradictory and underexplored relationship between reproductive and productive labor, and demonstrated that work without seeming value was, in fact, highly valuable. At the time, and up to the present-day, many socialist feminists advocated for or developed dual (or triple) systems theories, which characterize patriarchy and capitalism (and racism) as separate systems that sometimes intersect. By contrast, social reproduction theorists sought an integrated theory explaining the logic underlying gendered, capitalist, and other forms of oppression.

However, 1970s feminists either reduced women's oppression to patriarchy, arguing that husbands exploited their wives' work at home out of sexism, or reduced patriarchy to a function of class exploitation, since capital expected workers to be maintained and reproduced for free.³ The centering of housework ultimately limited the scope of SRT, until Lise Vogel's work fully elaborated upon the contradictory relationship between capitalist production and social reproduction that Rowbotham and others identified, writing:

¹ Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, 66.

² Cox and Federici, *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen*, 4.

³ Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*, 103–4.

On the one hand, [domestic labor] forms an essential condition for capitalism. If capitalist production is to take place, it must have labour-power, and if labour-power is to be available, domestic labour must be performed. On the other hand, domestic labour stands in the way of capitalism's drive for profit, for it also limits the availability of labour-power... Over the long term, the capitalist class seeks to stabilize the reproduction of labour-power at a low cost and with a minimum of domestic labour.⁴

In contrast to the 1970s feminists, and her 1980s contemporaries, Vogel locates women's oppression not in the gendered performance of housework nor in women's capacities to be both wage-workers and domestic laborers, but in how a capitalist society organizes and importantly, constrains, reproductive work itself. Those in power in capitalist societies are solving a classical optimization problem, wherein labor supply for production is maximized at the lowest possible cost. The most common solution adopted by the capitalist class has been to classify reproductive labor as the responsibility of the working-class family. This arrangement disadvantages women because of their "differential location... with respect to social reproduction," since women are uniquely able to bear children and replenish labor-power.⁵ Gendered oppression arises because in performing domestic labor for capitalist production, women must perform domestic labor for men.

Vogel argues that equal democratic rights are insufficient for abolishing the capitalist material basis for patriarchy—that is, the opposition between reproductive labor and productive labor.⁶ Vogel's influence is evident in the current, renewed wave of interest in SRT. Contemporary social reproduction feminists Tithi Bhattacharya, Cinzia Arruzza, Susan Ferguson, and Nancy Fraser all cite Vogel's contradictory reproduction-production dynamic when analyzing care work. Fraser, for example, writes that capitalism's "drive to unlimited accumulation threatens to destabilize the very reproductive processes and capacities that capital—and the rest of us—need... jeopardize[ing] the necessary social conditions of the capitalist economy."⁷ Ferguson points to the "freeing' of the world's population [out of reproductive labor] for waged work" as an example of the contradiction between capitalist production and reproduction.

However, whereas Vogel argues that women are fundamentally different from other oppressed groups, whose inequality derives from "specific histories" (in the case of Black Americans) or "certain characteristics" (in the case of queer people), contemporary feminists have applied SRT to address more than just patriarchy's relationship with capital.⁸ Fraser and Ferguson, for example both point out the existence of "global care chains," where reproductive work is performed by increasingly devalued Black and brown women; Ferguson writes that the existence of migrant domestic workers exemplifies "the capitalist tendency to separate the processes of life-making from the processes of capital accumulation" in order to control and optimize both.⁹ Contemporary theorists also cite the biological reproduction of enslaved peoples, and the double-exploitation of women of color as both wage-workers and homemakers, as further examples of how capital operates along and reinforces pre-existing racial discrimination in its marshaling of reproduction to increase production.

I engage with SRT in my critique rather than other theoretical discourses on care because I believe it does offer a strong starting point: social reproduction feminists pushed political economy to analyze more than waged industrial work. The argument that the subjugation of reproduction to

⁴ Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, 163.

⁵ Vogel, 173.

⁶ Vogel, 178.

⁷ Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care," 103.

⁸ Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, 173.

⁹ Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*, 117.

production underlies both continuing patriarchal and capitalist oppression is a compelling one, and offers a sound explanation for why many commonly examined forms of care are undervalued and in crisis today. Out of the many approaches to thinking about care in mainstream political theory, SRT is powerful for articulating how capitalism both structures and is structured by other forms of non-economic domination.¹⁰ However, Marxist-feminist conceptualizations of social reproduction still leave something to be desired. For one, what activities are considered social reproduction, and why? Does reproductive activity look the same for all communities, and does the reproduction-production contradiction play the same role in all people's lives?

Melinda Cooper points out that social reproduction feminists often use the term to refer to domestic labor, as well as sex work and professionalized care work—labor that can fulfill very different functions, and does not have to be “reproductive” or immediately necessary to sustain life. Cooper questions whether women do reproductive work because of their differential reproductive abilities, as Vogel suggests, or that some work is termed “reproductive” because women do it. “Before women’s reproductive work was devalorized...women had first to be disciplined into the work of reproduction itself,” she argues.¹¹ Cooper criticizes SRT for “reinscrib[ing] the overwhelming identification between women and care” and “valorize[ing] the family as the exclusive institutional form in which care should take place.” While there exists an empirically obvious specialization of women in caring jobs, and the family has been one of the primary sites of care, I believe Cooper gestures in the right direction: there are under-acknowledged forms and sites of care outside of “women’s work” and the family. I will build on Cooper to expand the sphere of what counts as socially reproductive work and care work in Part III of this chapter. For now, however, I believe Cooper’s critique is indicative that SRT still remains tied to its origins in white feminist concerns about housework, and has failed to fully address or respond to the visions of social reproduction posed by other theorists and feminists over the past several decades—especially the work of Black feminists, to which I turn now in Part II.

II. *Black Feminist Responses*

Since the emergence of SRT, Black feminists have been complicating the Marxist feminist narrative and offering their own theories analyzing not just class and gender, but also race, sexuality, ideology, and more. Black feminist writing in the 1970s and 1980s called out racism in white feminist movements and called for analysis that acknowledged multiple interlocking systems of oppression. Black women contested how even leftist feminists neglected race in their analyses and universalized arguments about social reproduction based off white women’s perspectives alone.

For one, Black feminists objected to the 1970s feminists’ characterization of unpaid housework, arguing that Black women, and men, were often exploited in paid labor. As such, they never imagined that the route to emancipation lay in women’s access to waged work overall. Although during and after slavery, many Black women worked as field hands alongside Black men, domestic service quickly became the dominant occupation for both men and women in the late nineteenth century. Davis observes that in the 1890 census, “there were more Black people working as domestics than in all the other occupations combined,” while in 1940s New York, street-corners resembled “modern versions of slavery’s auction block” where white women could “take their pick” of the crowd to perform the most menial domestic jobs.¹² Davis also points out how race influences how we value certain forms of labor:

¹⁰ Arruzza, “Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist,” 11.

¹¹ Cooper and Mabie, “Family Matters.”

¹² Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, 99–101.

In this classic “catch-22” situation, household work is considered degrading because it has been disproportionately performed by Black women, who in turn are viewed as “inept” and “promiscuous.” But their ostensible ineptness and promiscuity are myths which are repeatedly confirmed by the degrading work they are compelled to do.¹³

Whereas commentators often argue that paying care workers more can advance racial equity by lifting Black and care workers out of poverty, Davis, several decades ago, offered a more complex framing: that Black women are poor because service labor is exogenously undervalued by capitalism is dialectically reinforced by how service work is considered “low-skill,” menial, and underpaid because Black women do it.

The racialization of paid care work meant that Black women’s oppression through housework was and is still enacted by white men and women as much as, if not more than, by Black men. Indeed, Patricia Hill Collins points out that the denial of wages to Black men often led to Black women being the primary breadwinners and heads of their households.¹⁴ As domestic servants who often had to live with their employers and little delineation of working hours, Black women faced sexual abuse from white men and wage theft from their housewife “bosses.”¹⁵ Hill Collins cites Judith Rollins’ study of Black domestic workers, who describe how their work was structured *not* to efficiently provide care, but rather to reinforce white dominance and Black deference.

Contemporary theorists detail how service occupations today mostly held by Black and brown women—home health aides, food service staff, child care workers—are professionalized extensions of jobs that once constituted domestic labor for private households; Black women’s oppression continues to be structured by white men and women, although the executives who profit off their systematic undervaluation may be located far away from the work site. Saidiya Hartman elaborates that racist violence and racism in economic forms like debt regimes “made it impossible for black women to escape the white household.”¹⁶

Second, Black feminists noted that the term “family” is understood differently in Black communities to include kinship networks and bonds extending beyond common nuclear or biological definitions. Cheryl Gilkes, for example, described an “ethic of familyhood” amongst Black communities, where the title “Mother” was conferred upon older female leaders and role models who cared for the next generation.¹⁷ Stanlie James and Hill Collins both wrote about the existence of “othermothers” who assist with care responsibilities, whether relatives or fictive kin, developing “a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable to all the Black community’s children...[and treat them] as if they were members of their own families.”¹⁸ Bernice Reagon further expanded the definition of mothering in Black culture, writing that “the mothering process” includes fathers, sisters, and brothers, and is really about “the entire community and the way it organizes itself to nurture...the community and future communities that have to follow it if the people are to continue.”¹⁹ To be a mother, according to Reagon, is more a conscious and constant choice to do the work of transforming the world for one’s people, so that they can survive and thrive, rather than a role defined by gender and biology.

¹³ Davis, 97.

¹⁴ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 54.

¹⁵ Hill Collins, 56.

¹⁶ Hartman, “The Belly of the World,” 170.

¹⁷ Gilkes, “The Roles of Church and Community Mothers,” 41.

¹⁸ James, “Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?,” 48.

¹⁹ Reagon, “African Diaspora Women,” 87–89.

These family and kinship arrangements have been problematized and stigmatized throughout US history, perhaps most infamously in recent memory by the Moynihan Report. The 1965 Department of Labor report, authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, attributed the poverty and struggle faced by Black communities to “matriarchal” power in Black families and the existence of family structures that he termed “a tangle of pathology” for differing sharply from white middle-class norms.²⁰ Black single mothers are often derided for being unmarried, rather than recognized for having a family structure that can accommodate the absence of a parent and for rearing children collectively. Alternative definitions and arrangements of family and mothering, however, can provide the basis for forms of social reproduction which do not further patriarchal or capitalist power, as this paper explores later in explorations of political organizing and cultural transmission.

Third, Black feminists have written extensively about attacks on Black and brown reproduction, which contradict SRT’s theory that capitalist power drafts women into the creation of labor power. Davis and Hill Collins both trace how birth control and abortion in America have been tied up with a sordid history of forced sterilization and white fears of “race suicide.”²¹ Davis details how Indigenous Americans, Chicana and Puerto Rican women, and Black women have been targeted by government sterilization propaganda and programs.²² Sterilization rates for Black women rose dramatically during desegregation, a tactic for reasserting white supremacist control as integration threatened white families’ sense of security; over 100,000 Black, Latinx, and Indigenous women were affected by sterilization abuse, often funded by federal programs and approved by state eugenics boards.²³ As Sara Clarke Kaplan writes, although Black women’s reproduction was coopted for “legal, economic, and social processes of expropriation and dispossession” during slavery, it has also “threaten[ed] the ideals of racial purity and biopolitical control that undergird contemporary structures of racial capitalism.”²⁴

In what has been termed “Jane Crow,” Black mothers are also frequently separated from their children based on neglect or endangerment charges with scant or even contradictory evidence.²⁵ Dorothy Roberts describes a pattern of denying and punishing Black women’s parenting throughout US history, starting from fear-mongering around so-called crack babies to the skyrocketing numbers of Black children being placed in foster care or monitored by the child welfare system.²⁶ Currently, more than 53 percent of Black children face an investigation by Child Protective Services in their childhood, a rate that is more than double that of white children.²⁷ Roberts outlines a vast and costly system which often traumatizes and harms the children it claims to protect, while assaulting and jailing Black and brown women—often preventing mothers from obtaining future employment opportunities to support their families.

If capitalism is simply interested in minimizing reproduction to maximize production, and if mothering is a free ingredient for accumulation, why would such systems exist to *prevent* Black parenthood? The horrors of forced sterilization and family separation appear counterintuitive according to SRT, in which life is simply labor, but a broader understanding of racial capitalism reveals that some life poses a threat to the racial-social formations on which capitalism relies. As a

²⁰ Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.”

²¹ Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, 211.

²² Davis, 226.

²³ Stern, “Forced Sterilization Policies in the US Targeted Minorities and Those with Disabilities - and Lasted into the 21st Century.”

²⁴ Kaplan, *The Black Reproductive*, 16.

²⁵ Clifford and Silver-Greenberg, “Foster Care as Punishment.”

²⁶ Roberts, *Torn Apart*.

²⁷ Roberts.

result, capitalist power seeks to extinguish and dominate such life, a possibility with which social reproduction feminists do not contend.

Lastly, while white feminists found the home to be oppressive, Black feminists noted that social reproductive labor in the home provided an important space for anti-racist resistance. As Hazel Carby argues in a 1982 essay aptly titled “White woman listen!”, “concepts which are central to feminist theory become problematic in their application to black women’s lives: ‘the family’, ‘patriarchy’ and ‘reproduction’.”²⁸ Carby points out that while the Black family can be a site of unequal gender relations, it also has served as a “prime source of resistance to oppression.” Angela Davis likewise writes that under slavery, the family served as a site of refuge and resistance, because “domestic labor was the only meaningful labor for the slave community as a whole,” labor which could not be directly claimed by the oppressor.²⁹ As those largely responsible for the organization of community and domestic life, Black women acted as “the custodian of a house of resistance,” not only participating in anti-slavery sabotage, but also creating everyday conditions that made survival and hope for freedom possible. Davis reflects on the “supreme irony” that the sheer brutality of slavery created a “deformed” kind of equality between men and women, such that Black women could “ascend to the same levels of resistance which were accessible to her men.”³⁰

Part of what made home a potential space of resistance for Black women was the recognition that white social reproduction came at the expense of Black families. Hill Collins describes how Black women choosing family over paid labor were severely criticized by white society.³¹ Hartman writes that in being “forced to perform the affective and communicative labor necessary for the sustenance of white families,” including being surrogate mothers for white children and facing rape by white men, “the domestic worker struggled to enable the survival of her own.”³² Even though Selma James allied with Marxist feminists in the Wages for Housework campaign, James pointedly demanded that “we want the money to have the children we want and *not* [emphasis added] to have the children we don’t want,” referencing Black women’s positions caretaking white children. James roots her demand for wages less in the idea that Black women created workers, but more in a demand for reparations, because the forced productive labor of Black women in “400 years of slavery” was what “made Europe and America great.”³³

Davis argues that the social reproductive work done by Black women is often seen as patently unnecessary. Davis cites the “deliberate dissolution of family life” under South African apartheid, where Black women were viewed as non-productive “superfluous appendages” and banned from white areas out of fear that “domestic life might become a base for a heightened level of resistance to Apartheid.”³⁴

Across all of these different arguments on social reproduction—the racialization of paid reproductive labor, the home as a space of resistance, alternative understandings of mothering and family, and white supremacist attacks on Black reproduction—Black feminists have repeatedly emphasized that reproductive labor is not simply a secret component of capitalism, but rather that capitalism relies on controlling, differentially valuing, and ending life in different communities. In her poem “A Litany for Survival,” Audre Lorde reminds us twice that “We were never meant to

²⁸ Carby, “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood,” 46.

²⁹ Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” 87.

³⁰ Davis, 89.

³¹ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 54.

³² Hartman, “The Belly of the World,” 170–71.

³³ James, “Black Women for Wages for Housework.”

³⁴ Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, 243–44.

survive.”³⁵ Black feminist theorizing emphasizes how Black reproduction is exploited to prop up regimes of white supremacy and racial capitalism, and yet also simultaneously provides a space for survival, love, deviance, and forms of care which challenge Black social, civil, and physical death.

However, even contemporary social reproduction feminists have not engaged with the full breadth and depth of these Black feminist responses. Many theorists, like Fraser, have been more attentive to race in their analyses, but treat Black and brown women’s social reproduction as “constitutive exclusions” or exceptions from a general rule of how capitalism functions.³⁶ In doing so, they implicitly categorize those experiences as peripheral, rather than central, to capital’s logic. The contradictions surfaced by Black feminist thinkers in the four major arguments I cover remain largely unaddressed, even by those who are influenced by their work. Ferguson, for example, dedicates a significant portion of her recent book *Women and Work* to the contributions of the Combahee River Collective, Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, and several other Black feminists, writing that “white socialist feminists just didn’t seem to get it” in their focus on housework.³⁷ She further acknowledges that social reproductive labour is “organized in and through social hierarchies” and that “the social reproduction of certain communities is more precarious and under-resourced than others.”³⁸ However, Ferguson ultimately believes that contemporary SRT’s focus on the necessary-but-contradictory relationship between production and reproduction offers “the most promising response to the Black feminist call”; for Ferguson, capitalist and other oppressions combine in the “tendency to reduce life to labour power,” while race is simply a factor which makes some workers more precarious than others.³⁹

Black feminists ask us to expand our analysis of social reproductive subjugation and freedom beyond the bounds of SRT’s narrow focus on labor exploitation. Their arguments reveal how racist and capitalist domination is willing to dispose of life and labor power, how slavery and its afterlife trouble dominant accounts of gender, and how the reproductive labor of Black women has been both conscripted in uniquely violent ways, and yet also extended beyond SRT’s most common conceptions of care as birthing, cooking, and cleaning for future workers. In Section III, I turn to the activities that Black feminists push us to view as essential forms of care performed in and for their communities.

III. *A Broader Understanding of Care*

When contemporary social reproduction feminists introduce what is encompassed by “social reproduction,” they recognize that the sphere of life-making activities is broad: Bhattacharya says it is made of a “complex network of social processes and human relations,” while Fraser points to the capacities for “birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally.” Fraser in fact explicitly acknowledges that without social reproduction, “there could be no culture...no political organization.”⁴⁰ And yet, the activities which make, remake and transmit culture, the work of political activity, is rarely analyzed as a category of reproduction. This gap in SRT forgoes analysis of life-sustaining activities that all kinds of people—not just women—leverage against capital.

³⁵ Lorde, “A Litany for Survival.”

³⁶ Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” 110.

³⁷ Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*, 110.

³⁸ Ferguson, 114–16.

³⁹ Ferguson, 6.

⁴⁰ Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” 99.

A more complete picture of social reproduction would include political organizing and activism, and cultural creation, preservation and transmission as key life-making activities; for communities of color in America, both sets of activities are crucially intertwined with caring for children and families, with maintaining relationships and communities, while also serving as sites for counter-hegemonic resistance. Moreover, these activities are importantly reproductive while defying easy gendering, often activities that women have actively chosen to perform rather than ones they were disciplined into.

Several writers of color have positioned political activism as a crucial form of reproduction, beginning with Black feminists. Other writers share Reagon's idea of "mothering" as a process that can be gender-neutral, defined by how a community organizes to nurture and continue itself. James likewise defines an essential part of community othermothering to be political action:

...a community othermother is also in a position to provide analyses and/or critiques of conditions or situations that may affect the well-being of her community. Whenever necessary, she serves as a catalyst in the development and implementation of strategies designed to remedy these harmful conditions...⁴¹

James continues by describing exemplary othermothering by those like Daisy Bates and her husband L.C. Bates, whose leadership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) centered on political action that nurtured their community's young people and the greater struggle for racial justice. The Bates home served as a safe place for the children who integrated Little Rock's Central High School, a space not only focused on ensuring the psychological and emotional survival of the students amidst white supremacist hostility, but also on fighting for equality and freedom. For sheltering the students—an act of political resistance—the Bates were targeted by bombs, shots, death threats, and arrest warrants. James writes that political activity seeking power and social transformation is a natural part of community othermothering, because it serves as a fundamental intervention necessary for community survival.⁴²

Closer examination of communities of color reveals two key ways that political action and social reproduction are intertwined. First, daily reproductive acts can be expressly political in an environment of oppression and danger: the Bates were, at the end of the day, providing snacks and listening ears to children after-school, the children were simply going to school, and their parents were dropping them off. Yet, in the context of segregation, Jim Crow, and vigilante white supremacy, each of the decisions made by the children, parents, and the Bates are political ones. bell hooks expands on the idea that otherwise mundane acts of reproductive labor become imbued with political weight, writing that "the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous...had a radical political dimension," because a homeplace provided the one place where Black people could be safe, where they could affirm their own humanity and heal the wounds of surviving in racist society.⁴³ For Black women to make homeplaces was a conscious choice, a "political commitment to racial uplift"; that a homeplace was "a crucial site for organizing, for forming political solidarity" not only blurred the lines between domestic labor and political action, it also made domestic labor itself political activity.⁴⁴

Secondly, women of color viewed more formal avenues of political engagement—protesting, organizing, and mobilizing for change—as extensions of their reproductive labor, care made

⁴¹ James, "Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?," 49.

⁴² James, "Black Women for Wages for Housework," 52.

⁴³ hooks, "Homeplace," 384.

⁴⁴ hooks, 388.

necessary by structures that would otherwise endanger the lives of their loved ones. Nancy Naples identified how long traditions of community-based work and political activism were essential aspects of protecting and bettering their loved ones' lives for Latina, Native, Asian-American, and Black women. Naples interviewed mothers and community workers from New York City and Philadelphia who practiced what she terms "activist mothering," caring labor defined by addressing their children's and community's needs through social activism.⁴⁵ The interviewees included "testifying before public officials...participat[ing] in public protests and demonstrations...and acts of resistance" as how they defined motherhood.⁴⁶ They described how their own parents—both mothers and fathers, challenging gendered definitions of social reproduction—taught and showed them that resistance to racism and agitation for change in low-income communities was a crucial part of raising their children. Naples ends her work by explicitly noting that these women's community work was inseparable from social reproduction, and warns against "orthodox Marxist theorizing" which considers the gendered division of labor in isolation from how women of color understood their own lives and labors.⁴⁷

More recent work analyzing racial justice movements has built off of this understanding that political activity serves a reproductive function. Deva Woodly, analyzing the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), discusses how care is intertwined with political action:

...it matters when whole populations are hurting from harms inflicted by the ways we have structured society...And so *to care* means to take seriously not only the material deprivation, but also the pain that accompanies these political realities, and to work to mitigate the causes and repair the devastating results.⁴⁸

Woodly further details how effective political organizing is not simply an isolated task that one performs, but how all aspects of interpersonal relationship-building take place in a different, explicitly political, emotional register.⁴⁹ Organizing ultimately is the work of developing bonds of trust and support—relationships of mutual care which affirm that people matter to each other. As such, organizing which stems from an ethics of care also reflects how other forms of caregiving are political. Ultimately, as Woodly writes, political struggle is a core part of life, essential to care, health, and joy for our communities, all while attention to care, health, and joy *within* a movement is a core part of continuing political struggle in the spirit of care which drives it in the first place.⁵⁰

But are people shaped into political actors in these ways? What determines people's outlook and how they relate to others and existing political and social systems? The continuation, creation, and transmission of culture are forms of social reproduction underexamined by SRT, but recognized as a crucial ingredient for maintaining life by Black feminists.

Culture is a vital part of one's personhood and identity, forming people as subjects, and weaving the fabric of a community's relationships and orientation towards the world. As such, those who contribute to its constant evolution and transmission, be it artists who re-create and re-represent culture, storytellers who preserve histories and values, activists who harness culture as the foundation of their political inquiry and praxis, or parents, othermothers, and elders who shape children into certain ways of life, are engaged in life-sustaining work which requires labor and

⁴⁵ Naples, "ACTIVIST MOTHERING," 448.

⁴⁶ Naples, 448–50.

⁴⁷ Naples, 460.

⁴⁸ Woodly, *Reckoning*, 92.

⁴⁹ Woodly, 140.

⁵⁰ Woodly, 157.

dedication. Our art, literature, history, food, religion, how we live, know the world, and know ourselves are all “social forces...social practices and social relations,” and therefore a fundamental activity of social reproduction.⁵¹

Carby, for example, writes about the significance of culture for people who migrate, especially those forced by post-colonial economic desperation or coerced into slavery. Upon arriving in a strange land that devalues and otherizes them, culturally specific practices offer “important alternative ways of organizing production and reproduction and value systems critical of the oppressor.”⁵² Hill Collins discusses how “retaining and reworking significant elements of [their] West African cultures” helped enslaved Africans provide explanations for slavery different than the racist, dehumanizing claims made by white slaveowners; later, in “urban ghettos,” language, religion, family structure, music, literature and community politics are all elements of a culture which provide Black people today with “oppositional knowledge.”⁵³

Reagon further details how culture sustains a community’s survival and political struggle. She writes that culture offered a space for Black people to be truly alive and “prosper” beyond “the narrow definitions afforded by the slave and post-slave structure.”⁵⁴ Reagon positions women as the keepers of traditional practices that strengthened their communities’ humanity and spirituality. These women crucially established “an identity that was independent of a society organized for the exploitation of natural resources, people, and land,” keeping alive ways of knowing and valuing that extended beyond dominant and oppressive Euro-American frameworks.⁵⁵

While I examine political and cultural activity as forms of social reproduction associated with survival, struggle, and liberation, both of these activities, as with other kinds of social reproduction, have been leveraged in divisive and anti-liberatory ways. Political protest is neither solely a space of reproduction for communities of color, nor solely used against racist power. White and wealthy communities perform social reproductive labor in political ways when they decide where to send their children to school,⁵⁶ when they call the cops on Black people in white spaces⁵⁷, and set norms for what good parenting entails.⁵⁸ The hostile crowds of screaming white families who virulently opposed integration of Little Rock—including the Mother’s League of Central High School—were also engaging in activity they saw as crucial to maintaining and sustaining their communities. The transmission of different cultural elements results in people with different values, who are more or less open to different ways of thinking, more or less oriented towards political action and social change, and more or less advocates of and players in existing structures of racist and capitalist domination.

However, it is communities of color who have predominantly demonstrated how care and love have been tools for survival, resistance against injustice, and movements towards liberation. By positioning their care as specifically political and cultural in character, by demonstrating how both the work of political organizing and cultural transmission are forms of care labor for their families and communities, Black feminists and communities of color show that social reproduction is a space of struggle *against* racial capitalism, forming not just laborers, but people with the agency to fight exploitation. Moreover, people of color have consistently reminded us that such struggles are not

⁵¹ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 176.

⁵² Carby, “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood,” 52.

⁵³ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 10–16.

⁵⁴ Reagon, “African Diaspora Women,” 79.

⁵⁵ Reagon, 79–85.

⁵⁶ Gross, “Podcast Examines How ‘Nice White Parents’ Become Obstacles In Integrated Schools.”

⁵⁷ Lockhart, “Boy Whose Lawn Mowing Prompted Police Call Gets Cops Called on Him Again for Playing.”

⁵⁸ Miller, “The Relentlessness of Modern Parenting.”

futile, portraying moments of resistance as moments where alternative visions of a better world come into being. In Section IV, I discuss how both the work of creating these visions, and of acknowledging their significance, contributes to the actualization of such futures.

IV. *World-Making, Political Movements, and Theorizing Freedom*

That Black feminist writers have examined social reproduction as already a space of liberatory struggle fills a lacuna in SRT. Contemporary social reproduction feminists universalize the necessary-but-contradictory relationship between reproduction and production for all women, in the process attributing capitalism a near-totalizing ability to make use of all reproductive labor and foregoing analysis of ways such labor can revolt against capitalist desires. At the same time, social reproduction feminists rarely offer pathways out of the crises in social reproduction they describe, few theories of what can form better, alternative worlds.

First, these theorists assume that all social reproduction serves capitalism in some way, either by producing people who will become laborers, maintaining existing laborers, or reproducing modes of sociality that maintain capitalist relations at-large. Mitchell, Marston, and Katz write that “social formations arise from the dominant mode of production and necessarily reflect and reproduce that mode in order to continue it through time.”⁵⁹ Bhattacharya defines social reproduction as “part of the systemic totality of capitalism,”⁶⁰ Ferguson writes of a “unity of production and reproduction...part and parcel of a capitalist class dynamic,”⁶¹ and Fraser says that “the birthing, caring, socializing, and educating of new generations...all of this is necessary for the functioning of the capitalist economy,” and that social reproduction thus has “causal weight” in its perpetuation.⁶²

Second, most theorists often end their analysis before providing any insight into what emancipatory possibilities might look like in real life, for actual people. Fraser, for example, tells us that we need “deep structural transformation of this social order...to overcome financialized capitalism’s rapacious subjugation of reproduction to production,” but gives us little else to understand what this transformation entails.⁶³ Bhattacharya gestures at the idea that “the essence-category of capitalism, its animating force,” are “messy and unruly” human beings who *can* flout capitalist domination, but likewise focuses more on the potential for struggle than the actual ways in which struggle is already practiced.⁶⁴

In instances where these feminists *do* outline what reproductive struggle might resemble, such resistance is enacted outside of capitalism, or through the complete and utter refusal to perform labor within capitalist relations. Federici advocates for creating a revolutionary commons “beyond capital’s reach...to forge new, collective, ways of living and producing,” while Kathi Weeks advocates for the refusal of productive labor. Meanwhile, in a recent manifesto, Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser praise the withholding of social reproductive labor altogether as a way of demonstrating how production and reproduction are codependent and simultaneously exploited under capitalism. Ultimately, each of these authors focus on strikes as the main way to refuse one’s labor in service of capitalism, or as the first step to modeling alternative avenues of life-making not beholden to capitalism’s demands. At the same time, these authors claim that “there can be no form

⁵⁹ Mitchell, Marston, and Katz, “Introduction,” 416.

⁶⁰ Bhattacharya and Vogel, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, 2.

⁶¹ Ferguson, “Social Reproduction: What’s the Big Idea?”

⁶² Mosquera, “Nancy Fraser: ‘Cannibal Capitalism’ Is on Our Horizon.”

⁶³ Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” 117.

⁶⁴ Bhattacharya and Vogel, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, 18.

of labour today (cooperative or not) that fully escapes capital's domination—that is not already imbued, more-or-less, with the imperatives of capitalist accumulation."⁶⁵ Such domination, these authors contend, is a form of existence. While these authors acknowledge the possibility and necessity of struggle, they also argue that everywhere, already, we are already shaped by capital.

Perhaps, at a macro-level, this argument can be true in the sense that to struggle against the capitalist system is to be shaped by that very system's existence. But the interpretation of all kinds of social reproductive labor as already oriented towards and serving capital, with either striking or escaping as our primary possibilities of resistance, gives too much power to capital and too little credit to the incredible labor that people perform every day against capitalist logic and power.

By contrast, Black feminist thinkers and women of color have always recognized the importance of not just thoroughly understanding and elaborating the structures of oppression, but also how to craft a life outside of and against these structures, how to build both a present and future where an alternative way of being is possible. As Hill Collins writes, “developing a Black feminist politics of empowerment requires specifying the domains of power that constrain Black women, as well as how such domination can be resisted.”⁶⁶ bell hooks chides Frederick Douglass—and through him, any potential reader who might dismiss small but important actions against domination—for failing to recognize the significance and resistance embodied in the care of his enslaved mother traveling miles at night to hold him in her arms for a few hours. Such devaluation is “a dangerous oversight,” hooks tells us, because it not only downplays the “powerful role” that people play by resisting oppression in their daily lives, but also undermines the future of our struggles by failing to recognize that resistance is a choice, a political commitment and act of subversion that one must make.⁶⁷ Similarly, Hartman asks us to acknowledge the ways that even as labor is exploited by capitalism, it cannot be “reducible to or exhausted by it,” having already nourished fugitive efforts to attain freedom.⁶⁸

We should not, Hartman warns us, simply make Black women the “figure for our revolutionary longing” and expect that their struggle will result in our collective freedom; we must recognize the often-gruesome material conditions that our history of racial capitalism has thrust upon women of color, and understand how their very resistance is exhausting and places them “in great jeopardy.”⁶⁹ The answer, however, is not to erase their agency, but to acknowledge that work, learn from it, and take up that burden as well.

I seek to theorize social reproduction in a way that demonstrates how people are always already enacting new worlds and relating to their labor in different, more emancipatory ways. In this, I draw upon Jarrett Zigon's call for “a politics of worldbuilding [that] rejuvenates one of the essential features of political thinking and activity—that is, the articulation of and attempt to realize a political vision.”⁷⁰ For Zigon, resistance, both actual and theorized, should not simply consist of “performative rituals for voicing dissatisfaction,” and not all prefigurative political acts are created equal: those that are primarily symbolic or temporary, lacking in strategy and vision for long-term social transformation, will do very little to alter the forces that structure oppression and exploitation.⁷¹ Refusing or escaping capitalism alone is not enough to elaborate new possibilities.

⁶⁵ Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*, 138.

⁶⁶ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 19.

⁶⁷ hooks, “Homeplace,” 386–89.

⁶⁸ Hartman, “The Belly of the World,” 171.

⁶⁹ Hartman, 171.

⁷⁰ Zigon, *A War on People: Drug User Politics and A New Ethics of Community*, 11.

⁷¹ Zigon, 11.

When Weeks explains that a demand for UBI as part of a demand to refuse productive labor is not necessarily meant to be achieved, but rather offers “perspective and provocation,” or when Ferguson describes “building solidarity” as both the “means *and* end” of a strike on reproductive labor, their suggested pathways of action fall short of the worldbuilding that Zigon believes we need. After all, we are trying to build a new world that lasts. What happens after the provocation and the strike? What are the new ways of being and relating that we can have beyond capitalism, beyond refusing our labor as a resource for it?

In the following chapters, I focus on social reproductive activities—including the building and organizing of political movements—which actually build different forms of social relations and enact alternative values and possibilities. I highlight the contributions of people who currently already are redefining and reclaiming reproduction, community, and care. Through this, I aim to not only demonstrate how existing forms of social reproduction already engage in a politics of worldbuilding, as Zigon understands it, but also re-represent both social reproduction as culturally grounded political resistance, and forms of cultural and political resistance as some of the most essential labors of love and care. Such re-representation, I believe, aligns with what Amia Srinivasan terms worldmaking, “the transformation of the world through a transformation of our representational practices.” Srinivasan elaborates that how we choose to represent the world shapes the world itself in two key ways: first, our representations have an effect on how other people treat the very subjects being represented, and second, our representations can “bring[] into existence new things or mak[e] things true.”⁷² She considers as example the beliefs in women being naturally submissive results in differential treatment of women on the basis of this expectation, while the expectation of submissiveness itself might indeed shape women’s behavior to be more submissive.

Along similar lines, I believe that the representations of racial capitalism and struggles against it matter. If communities believe the characterizations of most social reproduction theorists—that movements struggling for alternative futures are always already dominated by racial capitalism, that the counter-hegemonic caring practices being performed can ultimately be reduced to actions which reproduce capitalist subjugation, that we have no real way to contest capitalism while living in it—then what sustains the spirit and hope embodied by struggle? If we overrepresent racist, capitalist domination of life, we risk both minimizing this labor and foreclosing our own life’s meaning from ourselves, risk losing alternative perspectives, knowledge, and imaginations. To represent social reproduction as only that most gendered subset of caring labor, always feeding the drive of accumulation, can prevent people unfamiliar with the Black feminist tradition from seeing reproduction’s revolutionary potential.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I now turn to the work of people who confront some of racial capitalism’s cruelest impulses and yet make their reproductive labor a weapon against its continuation and a foundation for new, better worlds.

⁷² Srinivasan, “Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking,” 145.

CHAPTER 2: DISPOSABILITY AND CARE IN SURPLUS COMMUNITIES

I. *Wars Against People*

Social reproduction feminists generally assume that people matter to capital, if only because capital needs the labor power that is embodied by people. The quest for cheap labor, by many accounts, is the force which drives the simultaneous dependence on and minimization of social reproduction. But what about instances where capital does not need labor, or, as discussed in Chapter 1, where certain people's lives constitute more of a threat than a resource for capitalism's continuation? Does social reproduction still matter to capital when the bodies that are supposed to be reproduced and maintained do not matter? This Chapter focuses in particular on the stakes of social reproduction in the context of two necropolitical crises.

Indeed, capitalism does not always have an insatiable demand for workers. Marx himself acknowledges the role of new, more productive machinery in generally lowering the demand for labor and creating a "relative surplus population" or "industrial reserve army."¹ Marx notably categorizes one group of the relative surplus as a stagnant population, which provides an "inexhaustible reservoir of disposable labour-power,"² and is composed of "redundant" ex-workers, the extremely poor, and those unable to work due to age, disability, illness, or other incapacitating cause. A last group, the *lumpenproletariat*, is mentioned but unaddressed: these include criminals, vagabonds, and prostitutes. For Marx, however, nearly everyone in the relative surplus population still exists in relationship to waged labor. The extreme poverty and precarity faced by the worst off is manufactured to maintain a steady pool of people willing to take the least desirable, most poorly compensated jobs, thus depressing wages and instilling compliance in other workers.

When social reproduction feminists discuss racially differentiated reproduction, they make a version of Marx's argument: racism relegates Black and brown people largely to this last, most exploitable class of people, willing to take any job. Moreover, Black and brown populations are additionally made to be the "cheapest" laborers for capital, because their reproductive capacities are squeezed the most so that only what is necessary to produce labor remains.³ What Marx and contemporary social reproduction feminists do not contend with, however, are how processes that constrict life to the point of death in Black and brown communities sustain the social and political order needed for the continuation of racial capitalism.

Achille Mbembe's most recent writing on necropolitics describes how the development of financialized capital and technology increasingly renders subaltern populations disposable:

...contrary to the masters of yesteryear, today's masters no longer need slaves. As the burden of having slaves became too great, masters mostly sought to dispense with them...since the new capitalism is above all specular...the erstwhile masters now strive to get rid of their slaves. With no slaves, it is thought, no revolt can take place.⁴

In particular, under today's version of capitalism, Mbembe claims that "today's Negro" is that particular "subaltern category of humanity" which is "a superfluous and almost excessive part for

¹ Marx et al., *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 786–95.

² Marx et al., 796.

³ Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*, 116.

⁴ Hartman, "The Belly of the World," 171.

⁵ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 179.

which capital has no use.”⁶ In this, racism is “the driver of the necropolitical principle,” as it delineates certain populations as more “naturally” expendable, such that the premature deaths in these populations come to seem expected.⁷

Mbembe describes how necropolitics relies upon the confining of these racialized, unwanted populations to certain spaces of “exteriorized violence,” in particular “the camp and the prison.”⁸ Camps and prisons hold populations that have been displaced, unwanted, either outside of or within our cities; they operate as spaces for the state-sanctioned monitoring, policing, and potential destruction of life which has been not only dehumanized, but rendered useless for capitalist accumulation. Multiple scholars have built on Mbembe’s work to describe how different contemporary crises actually constitute wars against people, how different policies confine people to spaces of constant precarity and need.

In Part II, I examine the modern prison: how mass incarceration, and the policing and policies which produce incarcerated bodies, target lives in poor communities of color, especially Black communities. I suggest that prison as a site of social and physical death overwhelms its incidental function as a supply of labor. In the face of this, the social reproductive labor performed by the imprisoned and their families, which affirms humanity and protests control, flies against capitalist interests. In Part III, I turn to communities at the center of drug crises and drug war violence as another expression of war that targets low-income populations deemed expendable, often in the wake of capital disaccumulation. The opioid crisis in particular grimly demonstrates how death is a naked input for profit. Meanwhile, drug users who do not die are constantly rendered expendable through structural violence. Here, too, I find that forms of care provided within drug-user and anti-drug war activist communities are anti-capitalist.

Both incarceration and the drug war wage violence against communities that have been systematically excluded from the labor market, and subject to policies which produce concentrated poverty, trauma, loneliness, and desperation. In doing so, these wars maintain a racial and social order that serves capitalism and preemptively suppress threats to that order. I use incarceration as a term not only to describe literal imprisonment, but also to connote how the capitalist state primes certain populations for incarceration. Similarly, I use drug crisis to evoke the conditions which made certain people vulnerable to drug epidemics and consequently the war on drugs. Both of these terms represent a complicated war fought on multiple fronts against, fundamentally, people, against life which is no longer necessary for capitalism. And in both of these wars, people fight back, asserting the importance of life of all kinds, sustaining and supporting it through love and care, on the terrain of social reproduction. The following parts will investigate how they do this.

II. *Imprisonment and Abolitionism*

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a. *Disappropriation, Incarceration, and Necropolitics*

Currently, there are over two million people in prison or jail in the United States, a number which represents a 500% increase in the prison population over the last forty years.⁹ The explosion in incarceration has received widespread attention over the last two decades. Recent scholarly and activist literature often situates mass incarceration as a linear extension of slavery and Jim Crow, and argues that the relationship between capitalism and incarceration operates in two main ways: first,

⁶ Mbembe, 178.

⁷ Mbembe, 38.

⁸ Mbembe, 27.

⁹ Project, “Criminal Justice Facts.”

that modern-day prison labor is a continuation of slave labor, given that prison “wages” are often cents on the hour; and second, that corporations profit off of private prisons or government contracts for prison services.¹⁰

In response to these narratives, theorists like Jackie Wang and Sharon Luk contend that, although the “prison-industrial complex” concept is useful for illuminating the multiple profit and employment motives intertwined with the creation of prisons and prisoners, a “purely economic” narrative is not enough.¹¹ Both Wang and Luk seek an explanation for the enormous size of a racialized mass incarceration system in which housing prisoners is far from inexpensive, and the majority of prisoners do not actually work.¹² Drawing on Black intellectuals and the Black Panther Party’s theorizations of racial capitalism, Wang argues that prisons absorb the unemployed while reinforcing the existing racial order:

What will happen when new surplus populations are created and humans are no longer needed for production or consumption? As the U.S. deindustrialized and the welfare state was gutted...the solution to the problem of what to do with the unemployed people who had migrated to cities to become industrial workers—as well as the mentally ill people housed in hospitals that were shutting down en masse—was *racialized mass incarceration*.¹³

Similarly, Luk also posits that prisons fulfill capitalist imperatives by warehousing and disposing of people:

...as units of abstracted labor [imprisoned people] are not expendable but actually obsolete or redundant under late capitalism...From this corporate standpoint, the rental and reproduction of convicts carrying no recognizable use or exchange value would simply waste capital, whereas, in the final instance, only the capture and elimination of those convicted can conserve it.¹⁴

Luk also positions the convict within historical context: slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration do not constitute one continuous labor regime as some scholars have posited, but *do* represent political-economic forms of human management that respond to each era’s racial and capitalist imperatives. In our present era, the prison-industrial complex serves “industrialized genocide,” underpinned by a logic that sees people as products to be cleared, rather than “genocidal exploitation of labor,” in which the chief goal would be to maximize the labor power extracted.¹⁵

In this landscape, racism is the process by which different populations are organized on a spectrum between life or disposal. Prison abolitionist and geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”¹⁶ Like Luk and Wang, Gilmore describes the relationship between incarceration and capitalism as one predicated off of a logic of dis-accumulating excess labor, accompanied by dispossession. Illustrating the broader infrastructure that underpins the carceral system, Gilmore illustrates how communities deemed surplus in California are primed for incarceration through organized multigenerational abandonment. She cites policy decisions cutting back the social safety net as the cost of living increased, dramatically increasing

¹⁰ See, for example, Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, or the Netflix documentary *Thirteenth*.

¹¹ Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*, 82.

¹² Wang, 82.

¹³ Wang, 56.

¹⁴ Luk, “Ourselves at Stake,” 234.

¹⁵ Luk, 230.

¹⁶ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 28.

child poverty. In Los Angeles, community-based organizations, youth services, and educational programs were defunded in Black and brown communities, steadily increasing high school dropout rates while employment opportunities declined. The children of surplus places were essentially channeled into a widening criminal dragnet throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, and continue to be targeted for incarceration in the present-day.¹⁷

Wang describes how this kind of organized abandonment has also been accompanied by other policies meant to control and corral low-income communities of color into what she terms “invisible cells.”¹⁸ Both a prelude to literal imprisonment and a form of confinement on its own, these communities are entrapped in a web of financial interests which ensnare cash-strapped families in debt, municipal “fine farming” which restricts residents’ movements and criminalizes poverty, political grabs which either deplete or extract control over resources located in the community, and forms of militarized policing which routinely surveil, steal from, and kill people with impunity. In these carceral settings, exploitation and disposability are mutually reinforcing.

As an example, Wang examines the way that policing is tied to the generation of municipal revenue in the cities of Ferguson and St. Louis, where fines for meaningless “infractions” like having putting the trash out on the wrong date are overwhelmingly issued to Black residents.¹⁹ In 2013, court fines and fees constituted Ferguson’s second-largest source of income, extracting over \$2.4 million from the city’s residents, nearly a quarter of whom live below the poverty line.²⁰ Sarah Stillman has documented the rise of civil forfeiture across the country, where being suspected of a crime is sufficient to have property confiscated, a process that results in one hundred homes being seized in Philadelphia each year.²¹ A recent report found that “a one percentage point increase in unemployment... was associated with an 11% to 12% increase in forfeiture activity,” and that in 2018, state and federal governments took in over \$3 billion from forfeitures, often in low-income communities of color.²²

Beyond these more apparent forms of exploitation, other political moves can also restructure places so that residents’ already scarce resources are controlled or removed. Jon Cramer examines the Detroit water crisis as an example of a political dynamic of “infrastructural grabs” visible in urban centers like Chicago, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. The disinvestment in and lack of infrastructure in certain areas is not an instance of neoliberalism curtailing the state, but rather a state-driven resource transfer along lines of race and class in which Black, brown, and immigrant communities subsidize the social reproductive needs of whiter and wealthier places.²³

Detroit is an urban center with a majority-Black population surrounded by majority-white suburbs. After Detroit filed for bankruptcy in July 2013 under the non-democratic rule of an emergency manager,²⁴ municipal bond holders demanded a crackdown on unpaid water bills to guarantee a more stable revenue stream, resulting in water shut-offs for over 30,000 people in April 2014. Cramer places these shut-offs in the context of a larger struggle over infrastructural control. Since the 1970s, suburban politicians had sought to wrest authority over the water system away from the city, as the city sold the water wholesale to the suburbs and generated revenue from it. During Detroit’s bankruptcy, white suburban leaders finally succeeded by creating a regional water board in

¹⁷ Gilmore, 75–77.

¹⁸ Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*, 41.

¹⁹ Wang, 184–91.

²⁰ “Policing and Profit: Developments in the Law.”

²¹ Stillman, “Taken: The Rise of Civil Forfeiture.”

²² Kelly, “Does Forfeiture Work?”

²³ Cobb, “What I Saw in Ferguson.”

²⁴ Footnote explanation for what an emergency manager is and how they are selected + makeup of regional water board now.

which the suburbs are overrepresented. The board now has final control over the city's water, making the city itself a carceral space where residents' basic needs are held hostage.

Elsewhere, other cities have also limited their residents' access to reproductive resources and infrastructural needs. Chicago, New York, Washington DC, and Philadelphia have all notoriously pursued closures of so-called "failing" schools in their Black and brown communities which have been met by fierce opposition. The logic of disposability underpinning these actions is not lost on these communities. A group of four Black teenage poets from Chicago in 2014 responded to the city, writing: "We are not included in the blueprint of the new Chicago / We're being pushed out / Our buildings being transformed into condos / And we know those ain't for us." Later in their poem, the teens chant: "Exportation! Extermination! Eradication!"²⁵

The young poets recognize that there are spaces where life is not just useless for capitalist accumulation—the removal of such life is a precondition for it. Incarceration, both in literal prisons and in the "invisible cells" of communities being surveilled, dispossessed, and targeted for organized abandonment, are large-scale processes which relegate millions of people to premature death and, in doing so, propagate racial capitalism. As the anthropologist Tania Murray Li points out, "to fulfill the functions of a labour reserve—that is, to depress wages, and be ready to work when needed—the population must not die."²⁶ But the surplus populations we have today *do* die. Premature death shows up as high and increasing mortality rates within prisons through suicide, homicide, and lack of adequate health care.²⁷ It also appears in the large gaps in life expectancy between the communities facing dispossession and those who have historically benefitted from it; in Chicago, for example, residents in whiter, more affluent North Side neighborhoods live 30 years longer, on average, than those in a predominantly Black neighborhood in the South Side.²⁸

Incarceration and disposability do not disavow that labor exploitation *is* a major feature of life under capitalism. Capitalism continues to rely upon laborers for production, and thus, upon the reproduction of life in many instances; as prison labor shows, the very people deemed surplus can face some of the worst forms of labor exploitation and function as an industrial reserve army precisely how Marx defines it. However, racial capitalist regimes of social control depend on the power to ensure lack of life where necessary. In the age of carceral capitalism, Wang argues, exploited and disposable poor white people also demonstrate that "the methods of accumulation that were once reserved exclusively for racialized subjects bleed over and are used on those with privileged status markings."²⁹ That is, the present system of incarceration and dispossession, while only part of contemporary processes of capitalist accumulation, may come to dominate the future. Social reproductive labor that fights those seeking its eventual elimination will be increasingly necessary—and we can learn from prisoners and prison activists who do that labor today.

b. Preserving Intimacy Against the Odds

What is the role of caring labor in the age of mass incarceration? I first turn to examine what I will call "intimate" forms of care, both performed between prisoners and their family members and support networks, as well as amongst prisoners themselves. As Orisanmi Burton writes, "the rupturing of intimacy and familial relationships precipitated by the prison should not be understood

²⁵ Graef, "Englewood Students Satirize Mayor Emanuel's School Closings with 'Wreck-It Rahm' Poem."

²⁶ "Policing and Profit: Developments in the Law," 70.

²⁷ Sainato, "Why Are so Many People Dying in US Prisons and Jails?"

²⁸ Associated Press, "Study: 30-Year Life Expectancy Gap in 2 Chicago Communities."

²⁹ Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*, 125.

as an incidental byproduct...but as a tactic of war.”³⁰ That is, prison is often structured precisely to sever relationships between the imprisoned and their loved ones, with severe restrictions on communication, visitation, and other forms of care between those inside and outside prison walls. Mumia Abu-Jamal, writing from prison, describes how “the tangled web of human relationships...is atomized and ripped asunder,” and how “life-affirming” policy options, such as family and conjugal visitation, has been discarded in favor of “dark, death centered” ones.³¹ At the same time, prison also prevents caring relationships from arising between the imprisoned, with policies and actions by prison guards either explicitly or implicitly encouraging violence instead.

From the vantage point of capital, intimate care is both unnecessary and disruptive: as a warehouse focused on incapacitation before any other goals, prison has already pared down resources for life to barely ensure survival. There is no right to visitation in the United States, and many states have adopted controversial policies banning visits for large subsets of inmates altogether. Family or conjugal visits, which allow low-level offenders private time with spouses and children, have been recently banned on the grounds that such forms of intimacy are privileges that prisoners should be denied; indeed, the very idea that incarcerated women could be allowed to have children while imprisoned drove Mississippi lawmakers to ban conjugal visits.³² In the 2003 ruling on *Overton v. Bazzetta*, the Supreme Court determined that despite evidence of family ties being fundamental to prisoners’ present and future well-being, the “freedom of association is among the rights least compatible with incarceration.”³³ As such, the court granted prison administrators wide latitude to severely restrict visitation, including between parents and children. Moreover, the judges declared that “visitation alternatives need not be ideal; they need only be available,”³⁴ so if alternatives to visitation were too expensive, burdensome, or inaccessible, the subsequent loss of relationships was not a concern.

Even in cases where visitation is an available option, the physical location of prisons and jails—and the process of obtaining a visit which can be ended at the whim of a prison official—is built against the continuation of relationships between prisoners and their biological or chosen families. The majority of state prisoners are locked up over 100 miles away from their families, such that visitation can be prohibitively expensive and difficult.³⁵ Likewise, alternative forms of communication are priced exorbitantly, making them inaccessible. Writing about her younger brother’s experience, Wang describes how email and video calling, services that would otherwise be free in the real world, have extremely high usage fees in prison. Moreover, the introduction of technological alternatives also resulted in the phasing out of in-person visits, controlling and transforming the range of social relations that prisoners and their families are allowed to experience.³⁶ Elements of otherwise commonplace social reproductive labor—getting to hold and speak with one’s child, celebrating birthdays and milestones with loved ones, intimate touch between partners—are patently undesirable under carceral capitalism. “As soon as someone goes to prison,” writes prison abolitionist Ebony Roberts, “it’s almost literally like an umbilical cord has been cut. They’re no longer connected to their family, no longer connected to their community.”³⁷

³⁰ Burton, “Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work under Domestic Warfare,” 622.

³¹ Abu-Jamal, “Caged and Celibate.”

³² Severson, “As Conjugal Visits Fade, a Lifeline to Inmates’ Spouses Is Lost.”

³³ *Overton v. Bazzetta*, 539 U.S. 126 (2003).

³⁴ Thompson, “When Prisons Cut Off Visits—Indefinitely.”

³⁵ Acevedo and Bakken, “The Effects of Visitation on Women in Prison.”

³⁶ Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*.

³⁷ Warfield, “After Incarceration.”

Despite these barriers, families and supporters persist in providing care to their locked up loved ones, just as those in prison seek ways to care for them in return. Parents visiting their incarcerated adolescent children provide an important source of stability, encouragement, and mental support for people to resist the dehumanization of imprisonment.³⁸ People travel for dozens of hours, often across state lines, and fulfill extensive pre-visit requirements so that they can offer companionship and connection in ways that prison systematically deprives.³⁹ Those on the outside send books and other resources that help those in prison access education and improve literacy, encouraging them to look to the future and develop the means to contest violations of their rights.⁴⁰ When prison policies sometimes abruptly change—such as when new rules required that books be sent directly from publisher’s rather than free-book programs—support networks do not simply shut down, but find ways to navigate around the new policies in order to support the goals and desires of those in prison.⁴¹ Where the US prison system is expressly designed against keeping people whole, family members and supporters view visiting, calling, and letter writing as acts of labor which preserve kinship amidst loss and to prevent prison from breaking the imprisoned.⁴²

At the same time, incarcerated people do their best to provide emotional support and connection to their partners and family members; incarcerated parents especially have sought to provide counseling, advice, and a supportive presence to their children from within prison walls, and have actively resisted prison rules in order to be relocated closer to their children.⁴³ Victoria Law chronicles the stories of women who have used hunger strikes and letter-writing campaigns, often in concert with support from outside prison, to gain contact and communication with their kids that the state deems unnecessary. In parenting even when the state denies one’s capacity to be a “good parent,” the incarcerated refuse the state’s prescription of what kinds of care labor are sufficient for their children, and also assert their centrality as people to others’ lives. Across all of these situations, providing and receiving care testifies to the labor being done to sustain social life in the face of an institution structured for social death, to how social reproduction sustains community and familial relationships in the face of violence which would destroy them. Such labor has no utility for capital, instead explicitly countering forms of domestic war-making that aid in capitalist expansion.

Beyond forms of intimate care between prisoners and non-prisoners, those in prison also construct spaces of social reproduction with others inside that push back against atomization, loneliness, and division. Law documents how imprisoned women not only developed new kinship bonds and friendships, but also encouraged literacy and critical thinking, offer both emotional, monetary, and other forms of support to distraught peers, especially those separated from their children, shared food and resources with fellow prisoners, and start domestic violence support groups, among many other acts of care.⁴⁴ In doing so, they counter the sense of isolation and alienation that prison seeks to induce and challenge systems of control implemented by administrators. In some cases, networks of women prisoners helped peers attain clemency, seek legal help on their cases, prepare for parole board, and petition for changes in administrative policy, although a great deal of this care work was performed in secret, and often considered illegal.⁴⁵ Since

³⁸ Claire and Dixon, “The Effects of Prison Visits From Family Members on Prisoners’ Well-Being, Prison Rule Breaking, and Recidivism: A Review of Research Since 1991.”

³⁹ Lockwood and Lewis, “This Is What It’s Like to Visit a Family Member in Prison.”

⁴⁰ “Policing and Profit: Developments in the Law.” i-ii.

⁴¹ “Policing and Profit: Developments in the Law,” 89–91.

⁴² Burton, “Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work under Domestic Warfare,” 623.

⁴³ Law, *Resistance behind Bars*, 50–53.

⁴⁴ Law, 14–24.

⁴⁵ Law, 25.

sharing materials between prisoners is banned in many places, women caught sharing materials or advocating for their fellow prisoners—including demanding medical attention for those who need it—can be sent into segregation, or solitary confinement, or face brutal retaliation from guards.⁴⁶

Such care in prison does not only occur amongst women. Burton describes similar, and undertheorized, exchanges of intimate care between male prisoners despite the efforts of prison guards or “overseers” to “maintain order by actively promoting violence between the various ethnic, racial, and political factions in prison.”⁴⁷ The Black men that Burton interviews and exchanges letters with detail how they use storytelling, mentorship, teaching, counseling, and other forms of mutual aid to nurture each other in prison, both providing self-defense and rebelling against prison administration. Absolute, incarcerated in upstate New York, describes how cellmates who develop a strong relationship can make sacrifices for one another or use small but thoughtful gestures to convey respect and appreciation towards each other. A man named Black details how he helped organize “healing circles,” in which men would come together to share their feelings and advice, saying that “doing that on the regular...it made us whole, it made us respect each other and bond together.”⁴⁸ These men describe their work as “fathering,” as older inmates guide younger men to “read, write, study, and debate questions of Blackness, gender, family, history, spirituality, and more.”⁴⁹ Such labor recalls the practices of othermothering described by Black feminist writers, as men who are severed from their families by the state dedicate their caring energy towards the younger “generation” of those behind bars, doing what they can to ensure that they survive.

This is not to say the acts of care described here are the norm in all prisons or practiced by the majority of prisoners. Violence between prisoners still occurs as a part of prison life, often incited by prison guards.⁵⁰ Michael Walker, a sociologist studying Southern California’s county jail system, finds that racialized segregation implemented by guards under a policy of risk management may actually serve to increase racial strife and violence within prisons.⁵¹ The architecture of prisons and jails, both in physical buildings and the systems of administrative rule, present sharp obstacles to and few opportunities for building relationships of care and solidarity between prisoners. However, it is precisely within this context, in which social reproductive labor performed by prisoners for each other is considered both unimportant and undesirable, that the seemingly small acts of care which prisoners *do* have are especially important.

As Burton writes, “the dynamic and creative labor of kinship and care is a mundane form of collective rebellion” in a place designed to break people and their connections to any form of community.⁵² Although acts of intimate care exchanged between prisoners and their families—whether those families inside or outside of prison walls—are often overlooked and do not seem visibly dramatic in a way that signifies “rebellion,” they take a great deal of effort against the desires of the existing carceral system. Not only do these life-affirming practices preserve social relations, identities, and sense of humanity for those involved, they also form the social fabric and connections underlying additional, more traditionally political forms of engagement like protest and organizing with wider counter-hegemonic potential, which this next section examines.

⁴⁶ Law, 27.

⁴⁷ Burton, “Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work under Domestic Warfare,” 624.

⁴⁸ Burton, 629.

⁴⁹ Burton, 628.

⁵⁰ Cherney, “When Prison Guards Force Inmates to Fight.”; Ransom, “In NYC Jail System, Guards Often Lie About Excessive Force”; Ransom, “As N.Y.C. Jails Become More Violent, Solitary Confinement Persists”; Ortiz, “Gangs and Environment.”

⁵¹ Walker, “Race Making in a Penal Institution.”

⁵² Burton, “Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work under Domestic Warfare,” 629.

c. *Love as Political Organizing: Prison Rebellions and Abolitionism*

When describing the inception of Black Lives Matter, Alicia Garza emphasizes, above all, the centrality of love; “I love you, I love us” was part of the Facebook post which sparked a movement.⁵³ In other places, Garza reiterates:

For us as women who are organizers, there’s a way in which our hearts connect to each other and to a real deep love for our people...So the project we are building is a love note to our folks.⁵⁴

The historian Robin Kelley, drawing upon James Baldwin, also casts love as the animating force and beginning of resistance and revolution.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, Burton describes the Attica rebellion, which took place in a New York prison in 1971, as a space of “intense intimacy.”⁵⁶ If protest, organizing, and movement-building are necessary to create worlds where the people one loves can remain alive, it is no less reproductive work than feeding, clothing, and sheltering them. For those with close kin in prison, or those in prison fighting on behalf of them and their peers, that their activism is a labor of love which rebels against the capitalist and carceral system is abundantly clear.

The first form of organizing this section examines is that which has taken place inside the prison. Forming solidarity under prison conditions requires dedicated labor rooted in connections to and care for fellow prisoners; amongst the Attica Brothers, as those who organized the rebellion came to be known, intimacy formed the foundation of their collective political pursuits, including their theorization of the prison and the making of demands for better prison conditions.⁵⁷ The ultimate uprising, in which over 1,500 men took control of the prison, was triggered by a fellow prisoner being brutally beaten by a guard. Such organizing, in which prisoners banded together to declare their humanity and advocate for collective rights, was not limited to instances as well-known and dramatic as Attica.

Burton also describes the creation of the Inmates Liberation Front (ILF) in the New York City jail system during May 1970. The ILF began by similarly creating fugitive spaces of education and unity, before asserting control over, occupying, and staging protests in a string of prison riots across New York City. One of the prisoners described the uprising as a “spiritual” and “religious experience,” saying “Trane would have to play it and Henderson and Villon would have to put it into colors. It was art and it was life.”⁵⁸ After organizing and electing leaders, the rebellious prisoners made demands for better prison conditions that also reflected their unity across race and religion, seeking respect for the rights of Muslim peers, Spanish-speaking staff, and access to Black radical publications. They also positioned the series of prison revolts within the context of a long history of oppression against their communities, enforced not just by the brutal and dehumanizing conditions of prison, but by the circumstances faced by communities of color outside prison as well.⁵⁹ The ILF’s efforts, although violently overcome by New York City officials, would go on to inspire political consciousness and other rebellions in prisons elsewhere.

For many prisoners, political organizing was a natural extension of the intimate care work they had been doing for one another already. In the 1980s, women in New York’s maximum-security prisons began to counsel, cook for, bathe, and take care of fellow prisoners with HIV and

⁵³ Jennings, “The Love Note That Launched a Movement.”

⁵⁴ Garza, “A Love Note to Our Folks.”

⁵⁵ Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle.”

⁵⁶ Burton, “Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work under Domestic Warfare,” 624.

⁵⁷ Burton, 624.

⁵⁸ Balagoon, *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York* 21, 330.

⁵⁹ Burton, “Organized Disorder,” 32–35.

AIDS, countering the isolation and neglect such patients faced by prison staff. As these women “began to feel a sense of responsibility to one another,” they began forming community-building and education initiatives to challenge stigmatization and advocate for better care of these patients.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, women in Ohio and California prisons who had originally come together as mutual support groups realized that several of the women were in prison for killing those who had inflicted domestic abuse on them. As a result, they began organizing for clemency, sharing information on commuting sentences and court rulings, and in the process, countering prison operations designed to preserve separation and secrecy.⁶¹

Such prison organizing often resulted in retaliation from prison administration, and is clearly banned by restrictions in many prisons and jails on association between the incarcerated that is not approved by prison officials. The violent reprisals that prisoners faced for anything from peaceful sit-downs and strikes to insurgent takeovers not only demonstrated their disposability to prison administration, but also how such actions were clearly threatening to the capitalist state.

Prisoners’ efforts to expose and abolish carceral capitalist systems have been historically accompanied by organizing in their support networks beyond prison walls. In the ILF uprisings, for example, prisoners threw notes out their windows seeking solidarity; hundreds of people responded and surrounded the prisons to demonstrate support with the rebels, while also overwhelming prison administration with calls, visits, and agitating for public scrutiny.⁶² In the present day, much of the political organizing taking place in communities affected by incarceration has transformed into a call for the abolition of carceral systems.

Gilmore closely chronicles the work of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC, whose members call themselves ROCers), an organization started in greater Los Angeles by mothers fighting the criminal justice system. Mothers ROC came together from hundreds of mothers of color who were already “performing the arduous labor of being on the outside for someone,” providing intimate care for their loved ones.⁶³ As ROCers, they broadened that search for justice into the work of full-fledged political organizing which targeted both the policies that literally put their loved ones behind bars, as well as the forces driving the political economic production of surplus, such as the lack of resources and opportunities in their communities. Gilmore describes how they politicized the idea of motherhood in their fight against incarceration:

In the process of cooperative self-help, the mothers transformed their caregiving or reproductive labor into activism, which then expanded into the greater project to reclaim all children, regardless of race, age, residence, or alleged crime... [their work was] that of working women who refuse the state’s criminalization and sacrifice of their loved ones dispossessed by deindustrialization.⁶⁴

ROCers saw mothering as a duty to advocate not just for their own loved ones, but all those facing incarceration. ROCers not only assembled masses of mothers with imprisoned children to protest the carceral system, but also crucially activated their communities *politically*. That is, they analyzed the power blocs and forces of domestic militarism driving incarceration and disappropriation in their neighborhoods, defined their own shared values in the face of these forces, and then created spaces for their neighbors to be educated about policies structuring their lives and decide in concert on the actions to be taken.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Law, *Resistance behind Bars*, 23.

⁶¹ Burton, “Organized Disorder,” 24–26.

⁶² Burton, 35.

⁶³ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 183.

⁶⁴ Gilmore, 183–85.

⁶⁵ Gilmore, 236–40.

Reflecting Reagon and James’ writing on “othermothering,” ROCers believed that motherhood should be a public activity in which anyone can participate to defend the vulnerable. Gilmore writes that as activists increasingly dedicated their lives to Mothers ROC, “[m]any noted the bitter irony that in order to become full-time mothers for the first time, they had to lose one or more children to the system.”⁶⁶ As mothers joined the group, their forms of mothering “extended past the limits of household, kinship, and neighborhood, to embrace the political project to reclaim children of all ages” lost to the prison system, exposing its death-making functions.⁶⁷

Mothers ROC is one of several organizations across the country currently advocating for abolition—of policing, of prison, of the forces which result in bodies incarcerated. Both Davis and Gilmore came together with other activists in 1997 to build the group Critical Resistance, dedicated to challenging the reach of mass incarceration. Educator and organizer Mariame Kaba has organized wide-reaching mutual aid operations in response to the pandemic, alongside a campaign for reparations to victims of police torture in Chicago and myriad other political campaigns against policing and prisons, causes tied together by a call for “repair and restoration.”⁶⁸ “For people in [this] movement, abolition is, at bottom, a politics of care,” writes Woodly, because ultimately abolitionists are focused on creating “the material and social conditions in which most people do not harm others.”⁶⁹ Kaba describes the work of abolitionist organizing as work which seeks an end to “death-making institutions,” while simultaneously beginning to “build up another world that is rooted in collective wellness.”⁷⁰ Gilmore says that her organizing embodies the idea that “where life is precious, life *is* precious.”

Abolitionist organizers, in asking us to divert our resources and attention away from imprisonment and towards ways to feed, house, educate, heal, and nurture communities, are performing labor which affirms life on two levels—first, by agitating for changes which directly prevent people from being consigned to social or physical death, and second, by asking us to place the beauty and the value of humanity and life at the center of all of our social structures, relations, and processes. Such organizing, then, is social reproductive labor which contests capitalism’s reliance on disposability and disappropriation, which upsets the racial order upon which capitalism depends, and opposes capitalism’s hostility to life. It is organizing which also engages in worldbuilding, presenting us with an alternative vision of how people can relate to one another, and what a society that truly loves life, independent of capitalism, would look like. It is social reproductive labor which is far from necessary for capitalist accumulation, but rather an existential threat to it.

III. *Drug Users and Anti-Drug War Activism*

a. *Diagnosing an Epidemic*

In 2020, over 76,000 people died from opioid-related deaths.⁷¹ Over the past two decades, opioid overdose has claimed over 600,000 lives, making the opioid epidemic the deadliest drug epidemic in American history.⁷² Two key factors have contributed to the dramatic spread of the crisis: first, conditions of economic decline and previous exploitation, paired with cutbacks in social

⁶⁶ Gilmore, 211.

⁶⁷ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 239.

⁶⁸ Taylor, “The Emerging Movement for Police and Prison Abolition.”

⁶⁹ Woodly, *Reckoning*, 115.

⁷⁰ Taylor, “The Emerging Movement for Police and Prison Abolition.”

⁷¹ Lancet, “Managing the Opioid Crisis in North America and Beyond.”

⁷² Salam, “The Opioid Epidemic: A Crisis Years in the Making.”

services and support, resulted in both physical pain and emotional despair for communities across the US. These conditions were ripe for substance use disorder. Second, pharmaceutical companies—especially Purdue, the maker of the widely-abused prescription medication OxyContin—pursued an aggressive and fraudulent marketing campaign that promoted massive doses of its products, subverted public institutions like the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and explicitly targeted communities likely to misuse opioids. Altogether, how communities were rendered surplus and vulnerable and actively exploited as part of a profit strategy represents another example of how capitalism increasingly relies upon death, not labor exploitation, for further accumulation.

When economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton demonstrated a strong correlation between so-called “deaths of despair”—which include substance-abuse deaths—and joblessness, they prompted widespread acknowledgement of how socioeconomic distress helped drive demand for opioids.⁷³ Other research has also made this argument: public health experts showed that counties where automobile assembly plants were closed saw an 85% higher increase in opioid overdose mortality rate than counties that had not experienced closures, while journalists documented how prescription opioids first took hold in small towns already struggling with poverty, disability, and jobs lost to automation.⁷⁴ While contemporary media often presents the opioid epidemic as a mostly rural, white, and post-industrial Appalachian phenomenon, growth in opioid use and misuse has risen across the US in areas hard-hit by economic decline, including Black and brown communities living in precarity.⁷⁵ Ample research demonstrates that opioid use disorders have strong links to adverse childhood experiences, and that such trauma is also much more likely in places with high child poverty.⁷⁶ Neither is this association unique to the current moment; Helena Hansen points out how inner-city communities of color were the first to suffer from economic decline in the 1960s and 1970s, and likewise experienced a heroin epidemic in those years.⁷⁷

How companies have abandoned cities across the US demonstrates how people and social reproduction can easily become extraneous to capital. In many places, large corporations replaced much smaller and more diversified businesses, such that the withdrawal of companies and closing of plants now result in whole towns bereft of resources; the cumulative effects of widespread job loss and concentrated deindustrialization have led to the reduction of local public and social services, including education and healthcare, the abandonment and foreclosure of homes, and a sense of hopelessness and loneliness while destabilizing people’s relationships and identities.⁷⁸ Moreover, many workers have been left with chronic and work-related injuries—another marker of workers’ expendability to these firms—which make them unemployable, even more vulnerable to financial hardship, and in physical pain. People whose drug use arose in the midst of economic desperation, depression, and pain have thus been rendered disposable twice over; first, as bodies no longer relevant for capital’s interests and subsequently abandoned and second, as self-destructive “addicts” unable to be productive citizens.

Notably, that the opioid crisis has been widely termed an “epidemic” also reveals that some bodies are considered more disposable than others. Because the opioid epidemic has affected white men in the prime of life has made the American public more sympathetic to a public health framing,

⁷³ Gawande, “Why Americans Are Dying from Despair.”

⁷⁴ Venkataramani et al., “Association Between Automotive Assembly Plant Closures and Opioid Overdose Mortality in the United States.”

⁷⁵ Seltzer, “The Economic Underpinnings of the Drug Epidemic.”

⁷⁶ Sacks and Murphey, “The Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences, Nationally, by State, and by Race or Ethnicity”; Guarino et al., “Adverse Childhood Experiences Predict Early Initiation of Opioid Use Behaviors.”

⁷⁷ DeWeerd, “Tracing the US Opioid Crisis to Its Roots.”

⁷⁸ Russo and Linkon, “The Social Costs Of Deindustrialization.”

despite drug use disorders being associated with economic hardship in other instances, as Hansen suggests, and that addiction is a chronic health condition no matter the drug.⁷⁹ Differential portrayals of drug users based on race and class have constructed white middle-class users as “sympathetic and blameless,” necessitating “prevention, education, [and] treatment,” but cast rural, poor white users as “hillbillies” unfortunately linked with crime, and reinforced Black and brown drug users as typically violent criminals deserving of incarceration.⁸⁰ These images and their associated values reinforce bifurcated policies addressing the opioid crisis, with one set of policies focused on rescuing those who are deemed less disposable, and another set on dehumanizing and letting die those deemed more disposable. Furthermore, they cement the racial and social order upon which neoliberal capitalism depends.

Perhaps more unique to the opioid epidemic as compared to other drug crises, drug companies have taken advantage of these pre-existing conditions to exploit vulnerability to addiction for profit. Purdue, for example, “handpicked the physicians who were most susceptible to their marketing,” in places with “a lot of poverty and a lack of education and opportunity,” sending out coupons for free initial prescriptions and rewards for high prescriber physicians.⁸¹ Moreover, conscious of America’s racially biased understanding of who a typical “addict” supposedly is, Purdue also purposefully started with physicians serving poor *white* patients to prevent people from linking OxyContin to addiction.⁸²

Meanwhile, pharmaceutical companies also engaged in regulatory capture, “providing heavy financial incentives to political campaigns, advocacy groups, and medical school programmes,” while protesting, influencing, and evading regulatory decisions.⁸³ Despite knowing that the products they sold were addictive, companies like Purdue and Johnson & Johnson engaged in blatantly false and misleading advertisements to generate sales.⁸⁴ Presented with an opportunity to curb the rampant over-prescribing of opioids in 2002, the FDA consulted eight “experts” with ties to pharmaceutical companies, including Purdue, in its decision *allowing* such misleading marketing to persist.⁸⁵ Afraid of attack by big pharmaceutical companies, the FDA also refused to incorporate public health considerations into its drug approval process that would have assessed whether drugs were effective for their intended usage, and how they were actually being used or misused.⁸⁶

Although initial opioid prescriptions in the 1990s targeted poor white towns, by the mid-2000s, Black people were just as likely to be prescribed opioids as whites, while Indigenous Americans have had overdose rates on par with whites since the early 2000s.⁸⁷ With little threat of facing consequences for profiting off expanded addiction from regulators or policymakers, everyone was fair play for pharmaceutical companies’ reach. Eve Darian-Smith describes how the market for prescription pain medication exemplifies a necroeconomy, in which the pharmaceutical industry displays “casual disregard for human life, and more disturbingly, [pursues] aggressive exploitation of human death.”⁸⁸ Darian-Smith emphasizes that the opioid crisis was not a tragic mistake, but resulted from a series of deliberate decisions. In this necroeconomy, some people are considered

⁷⁹ Gumbs, Martens, and Williams, “Revolutionary Mothering.”

⁸⁰ Netherland and Hansen, “The War on Drugs That Wasn’t.”

⁸¹ Keefe, “The Family That Built an Empire of Pain”; Macy, *Dopesick*, 29.

⁸² Murch, “How Race Made the Opioid Crisis.”

⁸³ Lancet, “Managing the Opioid Crisis in North America and Beyond.”

⁸⁴ McGreal, “Johnson & Johnson Opioid Ruling Explained – the Key Points.”

⁸⁵ Kolodny, “How FDA Failures Contributed to the Opioid Crisis.”

⁸⁶ Chris McGreal, *American Overdose*, Chapter 17

⁸⁷ School of Public Health, “Racial Trends in Prescription Opioid Use Reflect Disparities, Undertreatment”; McCormick, “Historically Tragic.”

⁸⁸ Darian-Smith, “Dying for the Economy,” 67.

more valuable or less killable than others; for those considered the least valuable from the perspective of economic efficiency, death itself is a source of value which underlies business profit, implicitly and explicitly condoned by the state.

Although these two factors—post-industrial abandonment and economic precarity, alongside the pharmaceutical industry’s intentional exploitation of vulnerability and death for profit—drove the widespread reach of the opioid epidemic, what continues to make the epidemic so deadly is a third factor that likewise positions people as disposable: the war on drugs, stratified by race and class. The war on drugs has made the risk of overdose and death much higher by stigmatizing, criminalizing and incarcerating those who use drugs, often retraumatizing already vulnerable people.⁸⁹ Ironically, while drug-related murder charges are now leveraged against street dealers, companies like Purdue have yet to be held fully responsible for their actions. Additionally, the war on drugs incentivizes the rise of deadlier drugs in what Travis Lupick calls “the iron law of prohibition”: the best way to maintain the secrecy and profitability of drug-dealing operations under intensified prohibition is to make more potent drugs, which are easier to transport in small amounts but can be later cut and sold to even more people.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, stigmatization of drug users has also prevented effective treatment and needed social services from being accessible to enough people; the war on drugs has, at its worst, allowed or even encouraged the death of drug users in order to “send the right message” about drugs, and at its best, promotes punitive “treatments” like drug court and compulsory rehab which are ineffective.⁹¹

The social reproductive labor performed by drug-user communities and anti-drug war activists fights back against disposability and neoliberal ideals of productivity and desert in two main ways. First, they have created networks of mutual aid, often underground, which provide safe spaces for users, harm reduction efforts, as well as a community, close social relationships, and space for new identities for those often spurned by their families and previous communities. Second, based off this foundation of care, users and allies engage in political activism and organizing against the drug war, for better treatment and social support, while also creating new ideals of what community and care should mean.

b. Harm Reduction through Mutual Aid

A great deal of attention has focused on the dramatic rise in opioid-overdose mortalities, but people who are still *alive*, struggling with opioid use or drug use in general, receive little support, with addiction still perceived as an individual failure. Although the opioid crisis has been labelled an epidemic, over half of the hardest-hit counties lack access to essential treatment medication, while the overall infrastructure for providing medical and social support is lacking.⁹² Instead, drug users often experience blame and judgment from medical professionals that keep them from seeking care even in life-threatening situations.⁹³ When government policies suddenly restricted opioid prescriptions in the early 2010s without providing alternative treatments or genuine recovery options, users experienced dramatically increased pain, which drove some to suicide and others to heroin.⁹⁴ More broadly, drug users have for decades been denied housing or food assistance,

⁸⁹ Szalavitz, “Oregon Decriminalized Drug Possession and Is Helping People With Addiction”; Szalavitz, *Undoing Drugs*, 18.

⁹⁰ Lupick, *Light Up the Night: America’s Overdose Crisis and the Drug Users Fighting for Survival*, 130–31.

⁹¹ Szalavitz, *Undoing Drugs*.

⁹² Neighmond, “Report Finds An Opioid Addiction Medication Is Scarce In Places Which Need It Most.”

⁹³ Chan Carusone et al., “‘Maybe If I Stop the Drugs, Then Maybe They’d Care?’—Hospital Care Experiences of People Who Use Drugs.”

⁹⁴ Szalavitz, *Undoing Drugs*, 17; McGreal, “How Cracking down on America’s Painkiller Capital Led to a Heroin Crisis.”

separated from their children, faced discrimination in gaining employment, and harassed by the police if not arrested with subsequent abuse by the criminal legal system. They are often told that if they “end up in prison or dead,” it is a natural consequence of their actions.⁹⁵

In this void, drug users have created spaces of necessary, radical and collective care. As Maia Szalavitz writes about her own experience using drugs and spreading information about avoiding HIV, saying “I may not have been particularly good at caring about myself...but I certainly cared about my friends. And I didn’t think letting anyone die a preventable death was okay.” While the term mutual aid has recently connoted food delivery during the pandemic, queer users and activists during the HIV/AIDS crisis first began organizing mutual aid initiatives that provided information on the disease and underground needle exchanges; Tim Santamour, an activist who helped organize these initiatives, described it as “taking care of our communities anyway, regardless of what services may be available to us.”⁹⁶ Building off this foundation, drug users addressing the opioid crisis have also created furtive networks to provide care to other users, including harm reduction efforts—before such efforts were substantiated by research or legalized.

Harm reduction typically involves four main approaches: establishing needle exchanges, which can prevent infection and the spread of disease; providing naloxone, a life-saving overdose treatment drug; offering access to medication-assisted treatment, which uses drugs like methadone and buprenorphine to wean people off stronger opioids; and operating safe-consumption sites, where people can consume drugs in a mutually protective setting together. Above all, harm reduction practices are united by a desire to support people and meet them where they are, the opportunity to provide someone with human contact, recognition, respect, and genuine care instead of simply sterile or professionalized medical treatment.

Lupick describes how Jess Tilley, today the Executive Director of the New England Users Union, first encountered harm reduction efforts through a needle exchange site called Tapestry in Massachusetts. Having faced disdain and disapproval multiple times when seeking medical attention, Tilley was so scared of going to a hospital that she nearly lost her arm from an infection. At Tapestry, however, she found a different kind of care:

Jess’s eyes swelled with tears as she began to understand what she was seeing. Staff were kind and warm with everyone they assisted. Clean syringes and other supplies including condoms were available and free to those who asked. It was a safe space for people who used drugs...Tapestry revealed a new world. [...] “Before I walked into the Tapestry office, I was sure that I would be dead within a year and had no desire to live,” she says.⁹⁷

Soon, Tilley became a part of the Tapestry community and helped staff seek out other users who could benefit from the needle exchange. Tapestry paid her a stipend in return for her volunteer work, and Tilley began teaching other drug users safe injection methods and harm reduction strategies. “I flourished. I loved it,” Tilley told Lupick.⁹⁸ Importantly, Tapestry did not pressure Tilley to quit using, and she helped save lives and regain her own will to live while still on heroin.

Multiple drug users and activists describe how providing harm reduction through mutual aid networks is social reproductive labor, not only because it literally saves lives, but also because these aid networks provide love, relationships, community, and opportunities for identities besides “addict” to be formed and recognized. Louise Vincent, who helped operate one of the largest

⁹⁵ Revier, “Without Drug Court, You’ll End Up in Prison or Dead?: Therapeutic Surveillance and Addiction Narratives in Treatment Court.”

⁹⁶ Dowdy and Cohen, “Solidarity, Not Charity.”

⁹⁷ Lupick, *Light Up the Night: America’s Overdose Crisis and the Drug Users Fighting for Survival*, 49–50.

⁹⁸ Lupick, 52.

underground needle exchanges across the South, described her work saying “This is kindness. This is love.”⁹⁹ When Vincent found other drug users who were trying to spread harm reduction efforts across the country, she “felt she had found her family” and that she was “forging a new identity...empowered by a new purpose.”¹⁰⁰ Dan Bigg, who secretly distributed naloxone across the country when it was still heavily regulated and virtually inaccessible, is remembered as affectionately as any family member might be by other users and activists, described as “always giving gifts...his time, his experience, his resources, his wisdom, his love.”¹⁰¹ When recounting the work of VOCAL-NY, an anti-drug war activist organization, anthropologist Jarrett Zigon quotes a user who says that one of the group’s most important missions is “to help individuals address [dehumanization], and make them feel comfortable in their whole.”¹⁰²

Many user-led mutual aid initiatives do not provide harm reduction alone; they provide human touch and empathetic peers, spaces for making poetry and art and publishing zines, advocate for each other in tricky situations, and provide resources during.¹⁰³ Importantly, these user-led initiatives are *mutual*—people can be both the providers and receivers of care simultaneously. Tilley, for example, is open about being someone who is not infallible, who wants to stop “chaotic” drug use but sometimes begins using repetitively again. But, she says, “I have people around me...I’ve talked to my support, my network. And that’s what keeps me alive.”¹⁰⁴ Tilley’s experience also helps her create a space for other users to be open and unashamed about their own relapses, so that stigma prevents people who “pick up” again from overdosing behind closed doors, alone.

By valuing the lives of people who use drugs as they are, focusing on “any positive change” as drug users themselves define it, and creating community for people without community, the mutual aid efforts of drug users sustains life in ways resistant and counter to neoliberal disaccumulation in the war on drugs. These efforts contrast how neoliberal logic underlies other forms of drug treatment. Drug treatment courts, for example, divert some people from prison, but treatment involves invasive surveillance and the desire to make “addicts” into “productive citizens.”¹⁰⁵ Kerwin Kaye details how drug courts coerce participants into becoming compliant low-wage labor while adopting neoliberal values—participants are asked to demonstrate personal responsibility, must not mention challenges or trauma as part of their behavior, and demonstrate strong work ethic, among other requirements—or be warehoused as bodies in prison.¹⁰⁶ Compulsory rehab programs use dehumanizing tactics like “attack therapy,” prevent access to addiction medications, and rehab often takes place in prison anyways.¹⁰⁷ In Al-Anon, the twelve-step program for family and partners of drug users, providing love and care to people who use drugs was portrayed as the reason their loved ones stayed “sick,” a problematic form of “codependence.”¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, Andrea Lopez writes about how support services like disability benefits and supportive housing are often extended only when people are deemed to have suffered “enough,” upon expectation of impending death.¹⁰⁹

⁹⁹ Lupick, 64.

¹⁰⁰ Lupick, 115–16.

¹⁰¹ Castillo, “In Memory of Dan Bigg, Harm Reduction Godfather.”

¹⁰² Zigon, *A War on People: Drug User Politics and A New Ethics of Community*, 146.

¹⁰³ Szalavitz, *Undoing Drugs*, 233.

¹⁰⁴ Young, “‘They Don’t Have To Be Alone In This’: Drug Users Unions See Membership Increase.”

¹⁰⁵ Revier, “‘Without Drug Court, You’ll End Up in Prison or Dead’: Therapeutic Surveillance and Addiction Narratives in Treatment Court.”

¹⁰⁶ Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom: Drug Courts, Therapeutic Communities, and the Intimacies of the State*, 37–48.

¹⁰⁷ Szalavitz, “Why Forced Addiction Treatment Fails.”

¹⁰⁸ Szalavitz, *Undoing Drugs*, 245–46.

¹⁰⁹ Lopez, “Necropolitics in the ‘Compassionate’ City: Care / Brutality in San Francisco.”

Underground harm reduction also operates as resistance particularly given how the war on drugs has resulted in criminalization and harassment of drug users who engage in mutual aid efforts. Medical anthropologist Lesly Marie-Buer writes that “the threat of incarceration or program closure looms over our attempts to save lives,” as many harm reduction practices are flat-out illegal in several states.¹¹⁰ Brandie Wilson, who uses drugs and operated a syringe exchange program in northern California, faced murder threats from local residents who had the sympathy of law enforcement, in what she described as “a real modern-day witch hunt.”¹¹¹ Vincent was “still getting arrested every other day,” even as she was becoming a leader in harm reduction efforts and saving countless lives.¹¹² Although harm reduction has slowly and recently gained support outside of user and activist communities—largely because of their public political campaigns, discussed in the next section—users and activists practicing mutual aid have never waited for approval to provide unconditional care and community, saving countless lives.

c. New Visions of Community and Care

Although underground mutual aid networks are already performing deeply political acts of care, they also form the foundation for enacting care as explicitly political organizing. Not unlike the mothers and activists in Mothers ROC campaigning for the abolition of carceral systems, the kind of care labor that users perform for each other has driven them to target the policies that endanger their lives and the forces that render them disposable. While leading a candle-lit vigil for those lost to overdose, Vincent made clear that she and her fellow user activists saw political organizing as a crucial form of social reproduction that expressed their love:

“We are all here because we love each other... We care about one another, drug users, sex workers, loving one another, doing what they say we don’t do... We have so much love, we have so much to offer. We are here tonight with love. Love can heal us and love will heal us. This movement has healed me so many times and continues to sustain me... This was put together by people that use drugs, people that sell sex, people that they say can’t do these things... We will not stop until we are fucking free!”¹¹³

Tilley, likewise, has called the work of user political organizing “a labor of radical love.”¹¹⁴ On its website, the Urban Survivors’ Union (USU), which members ironically describe as a “lobby for drug users,” positions itself as a family, and mutual aid and political organizing to be co-constitutive caring processes critical to the family’s survival.¹¹⁵

User-led organizing has thus activated a community that is often excluded by others—even non-user allies—from politics altogether, as well as by poverty, lack of housing, disability, criminal records, and other forms of marginalization. Users and their loved ones engage in political acts which force others to grapple with the humanity of those who use drugs. And in the process, they have created new definitions of community and care, engaging in the work of worldbuilding.

Lupick documents the rise of political activism in the drug user community especially over the past decade, including the formation and growth of the USU. The USU held bi-weekly national conference calls for users, eventually vocalizing four main goals: legalizing and funding syringe

¹¹⁰ Buer, “Overdosing in Appalachia.”

¹¹¹ Blanchard, “The Militant Harm Reductionist Advancing Dan Bigg’s Legacy.”

¹¹² Lupick, *Light Up the Night: America’s Overdose Crisis and the Drug Users Fighting for Survival*, 110.

¹¹³ Lupick, *Light Up the Night: America’s Overdose Crisis and the Drug Users Fighting for Survival*, 177.

¹¹⁴ Lupick, 209.

¹¹⁵ “National USU.”

exchanges; repeal of stigmatizing regulations on methadone clinics; an end to the war on drugs, criminalization, and mass incarceration; and legalization and regulation of narcotics to address the overdose crisis. In 2019, Tilley and Vincent helped bring together over 50 members of the Urban Survivors' Union (USU) for an in-person users' organizing conference—one of the first of its kind, which encouraged active users that they had the agency to amass and wield political power. And while USU focuses on the drug war, many user activists also highlight the need to address the background conditions generating substance use disorders, as Boston activist Angela Mae Ni Mhaille argued in a speech at the National Harm Reduction Coalition's October 2018 meeting:

“...where there is poverty, where there is systemic injustice...and endless war at the expense of those abroad and at home, there will be trauma and problematic relationships to substances. If we want change, real meaningful change, our goals must be no shorter than a complete societal shift, with a caveat of ‘preserve life by any means necessary’ in the immediate. Opioids and overdoses are the symptom. The epidemic is far greater.”¹¹⁶

VOCAL-NY, for example, includes a Users' Union that works to change drug policy legislation; at the same time, all of its unions work on Economy & Democracy legislation “to ensure that people are considered before profit, especially as it relates to pharmaceutical and Wall Street greed.”¹¹⁷ Drug activist and epidemiologist Samuel Friedman likewise describes the need for anti-drug war activists to counter “one-sided class war” and neoliberal ideology; coalition-based community organizing against cuts to public services, for safer workplaces and unions, and for reducing sources of despair and pain like climate change, can be essential to reduce the “upstream cause of pain, community despair.”¹¹⁸

While I have begun by discussing how users contest their disposability through activating and organizing their communities against the drug war, corporate power, and neoliberal state policies, Zigon argues that the very fact of users' political engagement itself also resists dehumanization: by “show[ing] they are indeed capable of doing the most human of all activities—that is, political activity,” the audiences users engage have no choice but to engage in political activity with them, and thus recognize their humanity, if only briefly.¹¹⁹ Thus, drug user activism does not only disrupt the conditions that render them disposable, but also disrupts how people see this disposability, and how the social order of the “fantasy world” produced by the drug war is normalized. Zigon describes how active users will often reveal their habit in the midst of lobbying politicians, leading to revelatory shock.

Users, after all, deeply know how their stigmatization, which leads to their being considered less-than-human, is far from rational. Such shock is an important political strategy, because rather than assuming that policies are the outcome of rational debate, users recognize that interrupting the irrational mindsets and ideologies that already exist is essential to changing society. Through shock, users change the ways that other political actors habitually relate to them, showing them “how things could and should be otherwise, new habituated ways of being.”¹²⁰ Zigon positions these revelatory tactics as the first action users make to demonstrate the possibility of different worlds to others.

As a second step, similar to abolitionist organizers, anti-drug war activists and users have also defined what these alternative worlds might look like, and seek to bring them into being. Where abolitionists challenge us to shift our understandings of what causes people to harm one another

¹¹⁶ Lupick, *Light Up the Night: America's Overdose Crisis and the Drug Users Fighting for Survival*, 177.

¹¹⁷ “Economy & Democracy.”

¹¹⁸ Friedman et al., “The Opioid/Overdose Crisis as a Dialectics of Pain, Despair, and One-Sided Struggle.”

¹¹⁹ Zigon, *A War on People: Drug User Politics and A New Ethics of Community*, 71–72.

¹²⁰ Zigon, 72.

and imagine alternative communities with kinder paths to justice and accountability, users and activists challenge us to change our thinking around how people come to need care, and imagine alternative communities with kinder forms of care.

Zigon argues that because drug users are often excluded from even other marginalized “communities”, like the Black community or a certain neighborhood—they have necessarily redefined the meaning of the term in constructing “a community for those without community.”¹²¹ Rather than rooting their idea of community in the idea of exclusion, as “community” within our current biopolitical order often suggests, this new definition centers on how people are bound together by the mutual obligation to care for one another.¹²² VOCAL-NY activist named Natalie puts the reasoning for this definition succinctly:

“Human beings can find themselves in some precarious and dangerous situations and so need help...that’s how I’m looking at it, community is all of us. That’s our community.” She went on to say, “That’s what the slogan is about, you know— ‘How many people have to die?’ —before some things are actually gonna change and happen. Before we begin to care for each other.”¹²³

This form of community is what drug user activists are seeking through their political organizing, as well as through the mutual aid networks I discussed in the previous section. Ultimately, the social reproductive labor of drug users and activists is creating a world where community is grounded in people’s recognition of one another as those we always already have obligations to care for, and care is a practice of being attuned to another’s needs, inherently valuing their life and person, and accepting them as they are. As such, these forms of care labor upset the social order upon which capitalist necropolitics depends, and encourages us to look towards a world free of capitalist relations.

¹²¹ Zigon, 79.

¹²² Zigon, 83.

¹²³ Zigon, 89.

CHAPTER 3: CULTURE AS REPRODUCTION AND RESISTANCE

I. *Culture in Social Reproduction Theory*

In the previous chapter, I noted how drug user activists point out that the very fabric of our politics is constituted by habituated ways of being—habits, customs, social relations, and ways of knowing that we have implicitly or explicitly been socialized into. How we think about the world and other possible worlds, how we conceptualize our own and others' identities, and how we orient ourselves within systems like racial capitalism—whether in compliance or in opposition to it—is something formed by our communities and the people around us, by the cultures with which we identify and in which we participate. Culture, as these activists show, is a site of struggle, something that we must constantly choose to create, continue, or change.

In their manifesto *Feminism for the 99%*, Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser make references to the “currents of neoliberal culture,” how the “symbolic violence of mainstream culture...colonizes our minds, distorts our bodies, and silences our voices,” and criticizes “mass culture.”¹ Where there is some consideration of culture by other authors, it is usually about how representations of reproductive labor in art, media, and literature either serve or reflect the necessary-yet-contradictory relationship between reproduction and capitalism, and its crisis tendencies, in real life. As Sean Cashbaugh observes, such analysis “does not address the ways that culture contributes to the reproduction of labor-power itself.”² At most, these analyses discuss how certain cultural elements contribute to the reproduction of capitalism as a whole. However, a closer examination of actual cultural works—like forms of art and literature—and cultural practices—how children are raised, which traditions are maintained, what values and sources of knowledge are centralized—as forms of reproduction that shape people is largely missing from mainstream SRT.

In Chapter 1, I reviewed how by contrast, Black feminist thinkers have long portrayed transmitting culture as social reproductive labor that provides Black communities with alternative and oppositional knowledges, space for their humanity and spirituality, and the foundation for political organizing. This Chapter was also inspired by the ideas of other women who demonstrate the primacy of culture to survival and life. Chicano and Chicana activists and writers found art, poetry, music, and theater to be crucial vessels for achieving social change, individual and community development, and resistance to both colonial and patriarchal logic.³ Lisa Lowe, writing on how Asian American culture has been composed by its exclusion from dominant American identity, identifies culture as the space where “alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and public life are imagined,” where people come to understand and construct meaning for themselves, their communities, and their histories.⁴

Voices from outside of academic work and in communities of color also testify to the idea that cultural activity is a vital part of life. In Gary Okihiro's interviews with Asian Americans, people describe how cultural forms and practices, like art, language, and the passing on of traditions, make them whole. “I don't know how to describe it, but life feels real here in Chinatown,” says one Chinese woman, while an older Japanese man reflects on how “You are a homeless dog without your identity...Losing identity [means] you lose your way of life.”⁵ Similarly, in interviews with

¹ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99 Percent*.

² Cashbaugh, “Back to Basics with Labor-Power.”

³ Quinonez, “Re(Riting) the Chicana Postcolonial: From Traitor to 21st Century Interpreter,” 131.

⁴ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 22.

⁵ Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 111–16.

Indigenous peoples, one Blackfoot elder intoned that “[we] have the responsibility to pass along our survival values so that our young can carry on our traditions...when we talk about genocide the definition is to extinguish the culture through the children.” These Blackfoot elders described how raising a child to know Blackfoot values, histories, and knowledge involves parents, grandparents, and other elders, and how “our strength to survive” lies in maintaining “a value system and belief system that teaches us what is sacred knowledge and what is traditional knowledge.”⁶

Cashbaugh is one of the few who has recently pointed out this lacuna in SRT and begun to explore culture as reproductive labor, citing both Michael Denning’s work on how culture “forms, subjects, disciplines, entertains, and qualifies labor power,” and Marx’s inclusion of a “historical and moral element” that depends on “the habits and expectations with which the class of free workers has been formed” as a subsistence need for workers.⁷ In particular, Cashbaugh delineates two main ways that culture is reproductive. First, as cultural forms like media are often commodities, they both reproduce capitalism through being consumed, and likewise reproduce workers by satisfying their needs for social pleasure. Second, culture also has an ideological function, which “legitimat[es] and/or limit[s] the reproduction of the relations of production undergirding capitalist society” by shaping workers “normal” attitudes towards using one’s capacities for labor.⁸ While Cashbaugh concedes that these pathways may “appear functionalist...[for suggesting] that culture reproduces labor-power regardless of its ideological content,” he notes that this *does not preclude* culture from being a “contested terrain” where one’s social reproduction exist at odds with the smooth reproduction of capitalist society. Cashbaugh argues that if capital only sees a worker as labor-power, cultural activity undermines this by being a space where workers clearly see how they are much more than labor-power.

In the following sections, I begin where Cashbaugh leaves off, focusing on culture’s ideological function and its contribution to survival in marginalized communities, and in particular on sites of cultural struggle. “Culture” in the following sections is loosely defined as the rituals, practices, norms, values, language, history, and ways of knowing which people in a community share and may pass between generations. With particular attention to Black and Indigenous cultures, I aim to concretize what Cashbaugh posits abstractly, and to more clearly illustrate how the work of sharing, transforming, and transmitting culture is social reproductive labor that can actively oppose capital.

II. *The Black Radical Tradition*

a. *Black Motherwork, Black Power, and Raising Activists*

Evidently, not all people have the same behaviors and values in their regard for racial capitalism: some see existing systems of accumulation as unproblematic or have never questioned whether these systems should change; others offer varying degrees of critique, resistance, and struggle against the existing racial, social, and economic order. For many, the families and communities in which they were raised have produced these different orientations. A particularly poignant example of this is how Black cultural traditions have shaped successive generations of activists within Black communities. Recognition of and pride in one’s racial identity, concerns about a community’s collective well-being, confronting racism and structural injustice—these practices can be regarded as values, norms, and activities transmitted from one generation to the next, especially

⁶ Clark and Wylie, “Surviving a Cultural Genocide,” 335–36.

⁷ Cashbaugh, “Back to Basics with Labor-Power.”

⁸ Cashbaugh.

in Black feminist and Black radical traditions; socializing children into these traditions forms a core part of the social reproductive activities of educating and raising children in a Black community. Such practices and values incubate political activism in Black families and communities against capitalist exploitation and racist oppression.

Many Black feminists and activists recount how their politics result from how these practices were taught to them growing up, and how the “sociocultural concerns of racial ethnic communities” impacted their childhood.⁹ A primary site where such cultural values and norms were transmitted was the home, in the activities shared between parent and child. Hill Collins describes how “the relationship between mothers and children can serve as a private sphere in which cultures of resistance and everyday forms of resistance are learned,” offering the example of how enslaved Black mothers taught their children to value themselves and resist succumbing to the brutal ideologies of their enslavers.¹⁰ She recounts how teaching one’s children to be fluent in their community’s language and to retain and honor community traditions imparts a different worldview, one that discourages white middle-class individualism and fights against dominant perceptions of non-white inferiority.¹¹ Within a world of racialized violence and loss, the very acts of teaching and learning to recognize, take pride, and thrive in expressing one’s Black identity is an essential part of Black culture for many communities, and also a profoundly political act in and of itself.

Hill Collins further coins the word “motherwork” to describe how within Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Indigenous cultures, mothering—whether for “one’s own biological children, children of one’s racial ethnic community, or children who are yet unborn”—entails passing on the recognition “that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and identity.”¹² This orientation towards communalism not only teaches young Black people to recognize and protest systemic problems impacting their local communities, it also meant that they grow up with consciousness about events in the Black community at-large. Beverly Smith describes how, as a child, she heard about lunch counter sit-ins in Georgia and integration efforts in New Orleans, how Black magazines provided information on national topics in Black communities, and how she grew up surrounded by adults who discussed racial politics at length.¹³ James likewise describes how such motherwork produced Black civil rights leaders like Ella Baker, who grew up with a “childhood socialization to accept responsibility for the ‘uplift of the race.’”¹⁴

Motherwork is not limited to imparting a sense of connection between individual and community; Black parents also more explicitly convey ideas about justice and practices of political organizing to their children. Abolitionist organizer Derecka Purnell recalls how her mother “told me stories about the Black Power movement each time my hair was being braided down from an Afro,” and reminded Purnell of the need to combat the stark realities of state-backed poverty and racism.¹⁵ In a profile of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, peers vividly illustrate how Gilmore’s abolitionism was shaped by her family and community; the family’s church “was heavily involved in the civil rights movement” and taught Black history lessons at Sunday school, while Gilmore’s father and grandfather had been passionate organizers for civil rights and labor unions, such that Gilmore grew up listening to late night labor meetings in her house.¹⁶ Similarly, Angela Davis has discussed how her own mother was an activist who worked to free the Scottsboro Nine in the 1930s and 1940s,

⁹ Hill Collins, “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood,” 372.

¹⁰ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 51.

¹¹ Hill Collins, “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood,” 375–77.

¹² Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” 373.

¹³ Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, 74.

¹⁴ James, “Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?,” 50.

¹⁵ Purnell, *Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom*, 34.

¹⁶ Kushner, “Is Prison Necessary?”

while Demita Frazier, who helped found the Combahee River Collective, cites her mother's strident rejection of male and white supremacy, as fundamental to her development as a Black feminist.¹⁷

This is not to say that all Black people participate in such radical or activist-oriented social reproductive labor; not all Black cultures embody the same ideologies. Some Black communities, for example, believe that the pathway to racial progress lies not in dismantling existing oppressive systems but succeeding within them; Black conservatives also point to a tradition passed down that values "Black self-help" and points to historical figures like Booker T. Washington as idols.¹⁸ Hill Collins cautions that "No uniform, homogeneous culture of resistance ever existed among U.S. Blacks," but suggests that "Black people have shared a common political agenda and culture, one that has been differently experienced and expressed."¹⁹ Moreover, even cultures oriented towards resistance and liberation may have problematic elements or need transformation so that "new, culturally specific, resilient lifelines" may be passed down for survival in a new generation.²⁰ Angela Davis, for example, began her activism within a more male-centered Black radical culture, and eventually passed down aspects of that culture while agitating for recognition of Black women's voices and leadership, and creating a more specifically Black feminist ideology.

However, across multiple accounts of how Black activists came to their political theories and actions, how political thinking and critical interrogation of existing systems plays a key role in Black culture resurfaces as a common theme. Sheila Radford-Hill describes Black schools, churches, and homes of family and fictive kin as spaces engaged in "resist[ing] the cultural imperialism of the dominant culture which assures our continued oppression," instead building "shared ways of seeing the world that insured our survival."²¹ Dani McClain writes about how she intends to "pass on an understanding of politics, power, and organizing to my daughter." In an interview with Cat Brooks, an abolitionist organizer and poet who also ran for mayor of Oakland, McClain describes the values and roles in community struggle they intend to pass on as Black mothers:

"You see these families, and every weekend they're going hiking... That's not our reality," [Brooks] says of her family. "We have to be in meetings and in the streets." ... Black mothering is a political project, and our mission—should we choose to accept it—is nothing short of revolutionary. "Our job as black mothers is to keep pushing the liberation ball down the court. Our obligation is to leave the world better for them and to ensure that they are equipped with the tools that they need to fight. We don't have the luxury of living normal lives," Brooks says. "I tell my daughter all the time—and it's harsh—but we don't live for the I. We live for the we."²²

McClain also discusses how a culture that normalizes othermothering, female heads of household, and "village-oriented" thinking can impart political values and norms in addition to political practices. From her own upbringing by her aunts and mother, she learned to push back against patriarchal gender norms, that heterosexual partnerships can be "nice" but are not necessary for life, and that many types of families are "perfectly whole."²³ These are lessons that she also imparts to her daughter. Hill Collins similarly describes how Black women's understanding of their own

¹⁷ Davis, *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, 102.

¹⁸ Asumah and Perkins, "Black Conservatism and the Social Problems in Black America: Ideological Cul-De-Sacs."

¹⁹ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 101. Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," 101.

²⁰ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 177.

²¹ Radford-Hill, "Considering Feminism as a Model for Social Change."

²² McClain, "We Live For The We: The Political Power of Black Motherhood."

²³ McClain, "As a Black Mother, My Parenting Is Always Political."

“distinctive relationship to white patriarchy” means that they teach their daughters to reject both gendered and racialized subordination.²⁴

While I have focused thus far on the particular ways that Black women, in their capacities as mothers and othermothers, pass on cultures of resistance, mothers are not the only people who do this work. In fact, many Black activist organizations—especially Black nationalist ones—fundamentally understood culture to be a site of political struggle, and thus the transformation and transmission of culture to be a crucial activity of political resistance to white supremacy. Jeffrey Ogbar describes how the Black Power movement, for example, redefined and sought to inspire pride in Black identity and culture across America:

To be “black” was a beautiful thing for the first time in African American popular culture. This new black consciousness found its way into the world of African Americans via Afro hairstyles, African clothes, and politically and socially conscious music, which provided a vast backdrop for the cultural experience of black America... Advertisements for skin-whitener nearly disappeared [in the black press]... these cultural and political phenomena inspired many to join or support Black Power organizations...²⁵

As another example, the Black Panther Party (BPP) also tried to cultivate a “revolutionary culture” within their community programs. Some initiatives sought to make music and the arts “reflect the desire of the people to be free” by being “anti-white, anti-capitalist [and] anti-imperialist.”²⁶ Ogbar writes that “the nearly universal display of Afros among Panthers, as well as their celebration of soul music...and [Black] food, fashion, and language, reflects the party’s intuitive appreciation for the role of culture in political struggle.” Associations with and promotion of Black cultural forms in these ways helped to signal a message of “love and affinity for the people,” which pushed back against the existence of white supremacist hatred and laws that denigrated Blackness.²⁷ For the Panthers, however, the most important elements of culture to act on were not music or fashion, but rather people’s values, politics, and willingness to fight for change.

The BPP’s other initiatives, including “survival programs” such as the free breakfast programs for schoolchildren, targeted these latter parts of culture. In these programs, the BPP not only performed social reproductive labor by literally feeding community members, but also seeded a new political consciousness among poor young Black people by linking hunger with capitalist exploitation and white oppression. Mary Potorti describes how, as children waited for meals to be distributed “Party members led them in political songs or engaged them in revisionist history lessons ... and [children] came to understand the Party’s efforts to counteract the oppression of the poor.”²⁸ The Panthers’ labor created new ways of thinking and engaging in politics among children and local residents of BPP chapters, who began rethinking their relationship to the problems in their communities, engaging in protest in order to address those conditions, and asking their friends and families to do the same. These programs even shifted the culture of local churches from their embrace of nonviolence and brotherly love, to an “emphasis on community empowerment and self-determination,” from upholding essentialist Christian principles to proclaiming that “[whatever] is necessary to survive in America is moral and ethical.”²⁹

²⁴ Hill Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships.”

²⁵ Ogbar, *Black Power*, 110.

²⁶ Ogbar, 114.

²⁷ Ogbar, 121.

²⁸ Potorti, “Feeding the Revolution.”

²⁹ Potorti.

Altogether, whether in intimate moments between parents and children, in broader communities like churches, or in the social engagement of national political organizations like the BPP, Black people have both performed culturally specific practices that inherently affirm Black worth in the face of oppressive systems, and also established norms, values, and traditions of critical inquiry and political struggle to dismantle such systems as crucial cultural practices. Over the last several hundred years, Black culture has fed the fire of Black political activism and molded people to be visionaries and fighters at the forefront of creating worlds free of exploitation and domination.

b. Black Music, Art, and Literature

In addition to traditions of raising children and building community in specific, political ways, Black culture has also included longstanding traditions of creating cultural forms—Black music, Black art, and Black literature—that sustain life and spirit in Black communities. bell hooks writes that within enslaved African communities, there was a strong belief that “beauty, especially that created in a collective context, should be an integrated aspect of everyday life, enhancing the survival and development of community.”³⁰ Art also provided an essential pathway for contesting racist and capitalist logic. Jesse McCarthy argues that “black resistance has from the very beginning channeled itself through cultural and aesthetic forms,” being intertwined with the expression of Black people’s humanity, already a political argument in itself, as well as various political demands for the recognition of and respect for that humanity.³¹ Black artists, McCarthy writes, have a “self-defined understanding of responsibility to...freedom.”³²

A number of scholars describe how cultural production has been and remains an essential social reproductive labor within Black communities, especially the development of Black musical traditions. Reagon describes how “a song was more than a song... [it was] a basic unit for the building of a Black American community” and cultural work was another way people could “take care of ourselves.”³³ Charshee Lawrence-McIntyre offers particular analysis of spiritual songs sung by the enslaved as music which nurtured both spiritual survival, affirming the dignity and humanity of their lives to each other and themselves, and physical survival, by leading people to freedom.³⁴ Spirituals functioned as “signal songs,” coded with double and triple meanings and Biblical analogies that convened secret assemblies and detailed plans for escape and rebellion while being undecipherable to white listeners, who simply thought the songs indicated religiosity.³⁵ Meanwhile, Mahalia Jackson, a gospel singer, describes how “a song must do something for me as well as for the people that hear it... If it doesn’t have the strength it can’t lift you.”³⁶ To write and perform music offered a way of strengthening oneself and the community, a shared vocalization of hope and survival that could be understood in ways language could not capture.

The composition and performance of music, however, is not the only kind of creative activity that has been attributed crucial reproductive functions. Writing and creating other art forms also shape and compose Black life and community. Audre Lorde famously declared that “Poetry is not a luxury,” arguing that “poetry [is] the revelation or distillation of experience” and in that, allows people to be “more in touch with our own ancient, black, non-european view of living...those

³⁰hooks, “An Aesthetic of Blackness,” 66.

³¹ McCarthy, *Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?* XIX

³² McCarthy. XXI

³³ Reagon, “African Diaspora Women,” 85.

³⁴ Lawrence-McIntyre, “The Double Meanings of the Spirituals,” 384–85.

³⁵ Lawrence-McIntyre, 387–93.

³⁶ Jackson, “Singing of Good Tidings and Freedom,” 536.

hidden sources of our power.”³⁷ Poetry, as the expression and reception of creative and emotional power, Lorde intones, allow us to access new ways of feeling and being in the world that are necessary to truly be alive. Meanwhile, Hill Collins argues that Black women’s literature often includes the figure of the “emergent Black woman,” and through explorations of the struggles of fictional characters, encourages Black women to “form positive self-definitions in the face of derogated images of Black womanhood.”³⁸ In this way, Black women’s literature performs functions of care similar to the way that loved ones and friends might encourage someone towards self-esteem and healthier relationships. This ethics of care characterizes a quote from writer Ntozake Shange, who says that she writes to “not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind” without the tools for emotional health.³⁹

Other have taken the idea that cultural production offers a form of care more literally. Blurring the lines between creative work and what is typically called care work, the artist Simone Leigh seeks to create art that is both literally and figuratively healing for Black women. One of Leigh’s recent exhibitions, “The Waiting Room,” reimagines what healthcare could be through a Black feminist lens, a world which includes herbalism and dance alike as modes of care; the exhibition includes an installation with 70 pounds of chamomile alongside workshops on holistic medicine, massage and acupuncture sessions, and educational seminars all free of charge.⁴⁰ Recently, a slew of Black artists, like Titus Kaphar and the abstract painter Mark Bradford, have started initiatives designed to reconnect Black communities with art as a way of encouraging and caring for youth in underserved communities.

The creation of art, writing, and music are fundamentally relational activities, with the artistic work or performance that results designed to facilitate an exchange between artist and audience. While these exchanges may often seem immaterial, invisible, or unacknowledged, they can be the site for meaningful relationships: Kaphar’s paintings, for example, has played a rehabilitative role in his own life; his “Jerome Project” portrait series of men behind bars helped advance a rapprochement with his formerly estranged father, who had been incarcerated.⁴¹ Black art traditions in particular often explicitly acknowledge these relationships—whether the norms of call and response in Black music and poetic performance, or statements from artists like Arthur Jafa, whose work meditates on themes of Black joy, survival and death, and declares that “I’m addressing Black folks” in his work.⁴² Black artists use these relationships as channels through which to provide different forms of care and recognition, including not just affective labor, but intentional actions designed to strengthen, heal, and free Black communities. bell hooks describes how communities so valued and needed this care that “[i]n our church if someone could sing or play the piano and they did not offer these talents to the community, they were admonished.”⁴³

In doing so, Black artists are often engaged in forms of resistance against racial capitalism. bell hooks writes about how the very act of creating Black art mounts two challenges under white supremacy:

Art was seen as intrinsically serving a political function. Whatever African-Americans created in music, dance, poetry, painting, etc.,...[challenged] racist thinking which suggested that black folks

³⁷ Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.”

³⁸ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 94.

³⁹ Hill Collins, 105.

⁴⁰ Sayej, “Simone Leigh’s The Waiting Room.”

⁴¹ Brown, “An Artist Rises, and Brings a Generation With Him.”

⁴² Mitter, “At His Moment of Triumph, Arthur Jafa Is Looking for Trouble.”

⁴³ hooks, “An Aesthetic of Blackness,” 67.

were not fully human, were uncivilized...[that they] lacked the capacity to feel and therefore could not engage in [art].⁴⁴

First, for hooks, the very existence of Black artistry across generations serves as an implicit but deep challenge to the dehumanization of Black people in white society. McCarthy seconds this idea when he argues that “Black American music has always insisted upon *soul*, the value of the human spirit, and its unquenchable yearnings. It’s a value that explicitly refuses material boundaries or limitations.”⁴⁵ Second, hooks highlights Black creativity’s persistence in the face of attempts by consumer capitalism to “destroy artistic production in underclass black communities” as a second layer of resistance. Poor Black people recognized how art was “crucial to the struggle against racism” and simultaneously “necessary to bring delight, pleasure, and beauty into lives that were hard.”⁴⁶ Even amidst conditions of exploitation, with limited time and resources, this creative power persists in serving this need. Jafa echoes this when speaking about his artwork, sculptures that give new meanings to everyday found objects. For him, the process of finding and transforming what is already there takes part in a Black tradition of creation despite economic scarcity that “stakes a claim in a largely hostile world.”⁴⁷

Beyond this, of course, the content of Black art has often been explicitly political, with more openly subversive and revolutionary aims. On one end of the spectrum, McCarthy details how Black artists have appropriated “the master’s tools,” how techniques and forms traditionally used by white people, often in programs of domination, have been taken up by those who were never intended to wield them. Examples include Kehinde Wiley’s “Old Master swag” in regal portraits of Black people, and Beyoncé’s music video for the song “Apes**t” being set in the Louvre, with “dancers pick[ing] afros in front of Mona Lisa” and choreography that announces “We...[once] exhibited as animals at the colonial fairs, have stormed the palace.” While McCarthy concedes that such appropriation may not constitute outright revolution, he still believes that it changes our conceptions of these master’s tools, how we think about and represent people. The technique is subtle, but still an expression of resistance.

On the other end, there is art as a “potent weapon,” created as an intentional political act by individuals and organizations. Graffiti, for example, has long expressed resistance to the forms of structural violence that have targeted urban Black communities in its content, while offering a form of resistance to ideas of private property and reclaiming public space in its form. Other forms of art as resistance have been more organized, such as the Black Arts Movement (BAM), which unambiguously used the creation of art as an expression of defiant Black Power. Emory Douglas, the minister of culture for the BPP, created art which sought to empower the Black community. One of Douglas’s works, entitled “All Power to the People,” depicts a crying, filthy pig in uniform representing the government and the police, surrounded by the barrels of shotguns held by Black community members.⁴⁸ That such creations offer resistance considered threatening to the dominant order is often demonstrated by the state’s response to its existence; graffiti is derided as vandalizing, while the FBI tracked prominent Black artists and writers.⁴⁹ Likewise, when the band N.W.A created the 1988 track “F*ck tha Police”—in which band members flip the script and prosecute the police, with lyrics like “takin’ out a police would make my day” and “my identity by itself causes

⁴⁴ hooks, 66.

⁴⁵ McCarthy, *Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?*, 233.

⁴⁶ hooks, “An Aesthetic of Blackness,” 66.

⁴⁷ Mitter, “At His Moment of Triumph, Arthur Jafa Is Looking for Trouble.”

⁴⁸ McKinley and Russonello, “Fifty Years Later, Black Panthers’ Art Still Resonates.” Mitter, “At His Moment of Triumph, Arthur Jafa Is Looking for Trouble.”

⁴⁹ Maxwell, “When Black Writers Were Public Enemy No. 1.”

violence”—the defiant song prompted a complaint from the FBI. Its message of resistance and furor at racist violence made it a soundtrack for the BLM protests in the summer of 2020.⁵⁰

To be clear, I am not suggesting the cultural activity alone can serve to dismantle systems of racial capitalism entirely. In many cases, Black cultural activity has been co-opted or re-presented as capitalist objects that, like Cashbaugh critiques, propagate the capitalist system in their consumption. The publishing, art, and music industries are commercial spaces that can be sites of intense speculation and financialization, and Black art forms are not exempt from the impacts of participating or existing in relation to such systems. However, the testimony of a longstanding relationship of care and resistance enacted in the creation, performance, and reception of Black art forms within Black communities—before Black art was even considered valuable enough to be a commodity within the frameworks of racial capitalism—suggests that there *is* something to Black cultural production beyond the production of commodities. A legacy of facilitating survival and rebellion, of cultivating and protecting humanity and soul grounds Black creative labors as forms of resistance and reproduction.

III. *Indigenous Histories and Futures*

a. *Cultural Survival and Resistance*

Another poignant example of cultural practice as resistance comes from the experiences of Indigenous people across the US. Centuries of federal policy have not only pursued disappropriation by forced relocation to increasingly smaller reservations, but have explicitly targeted the continuation of Indigenous cultures. When the Dawes Act of 1887 sub-divided reservations into homesteads, it actively sought to impose norms of private property and land ownership, and override Indigenous cultural understandings of and relationships to the land. When Army officer Richard Pratt declared “all the Indian there is in the race should be dead,” and “Kill the Indian...save the man,” he expressed the motive behind the now infamous policy of forcibly removing Indigenous children to off-reservation boarding schools in the late nineteenth century.⁵¹ Tsianina Lowawaima describes how such institutions were created out of the state’s desire to wipe Indigenous cultures that it determined to be “too dangerous, different, and subversive of mainstream values,” with “zero tolerance [being] the norm applied to most Native lifeways.”⁵² Lowawaima explains that children of Indigenous leaders and nations that had most vehemently resisted the military and government’s offensives were especially targeted for removal as a way to discipline and punish entire communities.

Mary Annette Pember, whose mother survived a Catholic boarding school, recounts how students’ Native hairstyles were cut, traditional clothing was discarded, and how students were forbidden from contacting family members or speaking Native languages.⁵³ So-called schools were less focused on education than on “prepar[ing] young Indians as menial laborers and domestics,” with the capitalist state’s belief that Indigenous culture—including language—presented a pathological obstacle between Indigenous people and productivity.⁵⁴ Culture was the distinguishing marker between whether people were considered entirely expendable, or able to be compliant and exploited workers.

⁵⁰ Grow, “How N.W.A’s ‘Fuck Tha Police’ Became the ‘Perfect Protest Song.’”

⁵¹ Bear, “American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many.”

⁵² Lomawaima and McCarty, *To Remain an Indian*, 33–43.

⁵³ Pember, “Death by Civilization.”

⁵⁴ Lomawaima and McCarty, *To Remain an Indian*, 44; Lomawaima and McCarty, 86.

Even after such boarding schools began to close in the late 1930s, the state still pursued assimilation. Legacies of boarding schools remained in education policies applied to Indigenous children, nothing was done to amend the conditions creating economic desperation on reservations, and the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 ended federal recognition of most tribes while encouraging Indigenous people to migrate to urban areas through the Voluntary Relocation Program.⁵⁵ Such policies aspired towards a future where there would eventually be no more need for a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), no more tribal governments or reservations. In government reports, authors explicitly positioned cultural transmission as reproduction: if Indigenous peoples assimilated to white urban ways of life, there would no longer be Indigenous children, or future Indigenous generations. As one BIA official voiced publicly, “I’ve always felt that the only real solution for the Navajo was to cease to be a Navajo.”⁵⁶

Indigenous culture was explicitly targeted partially because of its role in fueling resistance to American racial capitalism. Robin Wall Kimmerer recounts how the meaning of land for the Potawatomi people directly conflicted with capitalist goals:

In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk...It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold...in the eyes of the federal government—that belief was a threat.⁵⁷

Lowawaima lists Indigenous ways of thinking about economic life as an aspect of culture that boarding schools and subsequent education policies saw as “dangerous” beliefs, which boarding schools and subsequent schooling arrangements sought to wipe out.⁵⁸ The BIA intentionally chose relocation cities far enough away from people’s reservations so that Indigenous people who wished to leave had difficulty returning home; meanwhile, school policies after the closure of boarding schools included training young Indigenous people to especially value striving for economic efficiency. The persistence of tribes on reservations meant less land to take, as well as fewer assimilated workers to exploit. The audio documentary “Uprooted” discusses how the Menominee in Wisconsin were one of the first to have their sovereignty terminated, “chosen, in part, because of their profitable lumber mill.” Termination created poverty for the residents of reservations, feeding the relocation program; meanwhile, relocation often emptied out reservations of people so that termination was easily accomplished. Kim Tallbear writes that these attacks on people and culture continue today as “the colonial U.S. state and white supremacist citizens, whether armed ranchers or oil industry executives... [attempt to] eliminate Indigenous peoples from these lands, and they work to eliminate our relations with these lands, ensuring White occupation and profit.”⁵⁹

In this context, the work of passing down Indigenous cultures becomes especially urgent social reproductive labor, without which Indigenous peoples would literally have not survived, nor continue to exist. Kimmerer describes how a group of Haudenosaunee people in the Mohawk Valley are making space for others among their people, especially children, to relearn Haudenosaunee culture, so that “[t]he children of the lost generation could come home.”⁶⁰ Indigenous cultural revival is treated as a form of healing by those who do the work, as essential to caring for their people as treating any physical illness, providing sustenance in spirituality and identity. Natalie Diaz,

⁵⁵ Campbell, “How America’s Past Shapes Native Americans’ Present.”

⁵⁶ Nesterak, “Uprooted: The 1950s Plan to Erase Indian Country.”

⁵⁷ Kimmerer, “Braiding Sweetgrass,” 32.

⁵⁸ Lowawaima and McCarty, *To Remain an Indian*, 6–11.

⁵⁹ TallBear, “Badass (Indigenous) Women Caretake Relations.”

⁶⁰ Kimmerer, “Braiding Sweetgrass,” 313.

a member of the Mojave people, argues that “Language is where I am constructed as either possible or impossible...to lose a language is also to lose the body, the bodies of our ancestors and our future.” For Diaz, reclaiming Mojave language and culture is to regain “the autonomy to love ourselves.”⁶¹ Meanwhile, Sheilah Nicholas describes her journey reconnecting with her Hopi culture, identity, and language as the “lifework” of preparing a cultural home for future generations, so that her children and grandchildren can truly *be* Hopi.⁶²

Such acts of life-making maintain ways of living with, valuing, and relating to other beings and the earth that reject the foundations of capitalist accumulation. The persistence, survival, and revival of Indigenous cultures today represent the results of generations of anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist resistance in the face of large-scale attempts to extinguish these ways of living and being. In the next section, I explore how such cultures also form the foundation of explicit political contestation of attempts to expand capitalist accumulation and exploitation today, and sustain life in ways counter to capitalist logic.

b. Battle for the Future

From April 2016 to February 2017, seven nations of Dakota-, Nakota-, and Lakota-speaking Indigenous peoples created a series of encampments to block the construction of the \$3.8 billion Energy Transfer Partners’ Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), a nearly two thousand-mile oil pipeline running from North Dakota to southern Illinois. The pipeline was set to be constructed upstream from the Standing Rock reservation, posing a threat to the water supply and sacred Native cultural sites. The Oceti Sakowin peoples, members of over 300 Native tribes, and non-Indigenous allies gathered to peacefully demonstrate and physically block the pipeline’s continuation. Nick Estes describes how those in the camps—which at one point included over 10,000 people—cast their protest as an act of care for their human and nonhuman kin alike: “Mni Sose, the Missouri River, is one such nonhuman relative who is alive...protecting one’s relatives is part of enacting kinship.”⁶³ Moreover, Estes emphasizes that this kind of care, protection, and kinship, grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to several forms of life, “exist in opposition to capitalism.”

Several other Native voices described protests against DAPL, and against other pipelines and environmental threats, in similar terms of care. For one, resource extraction has routinely threatened Indigenous communities by poisoning the water, plants, animals, and people, while camps of oil laborers have often coincided with increased rates of missing and murdered Indigenous people, especially women and Two Spirits.⁶⁴ Activists describe their protest and other resistance work as responsibilities to their community and future generations, to ensure that they can be physically alive *and* alive as Indigenous people. Second, several strands of Indigenous knowledge assert a continuous relation between people and other beings, including elements like air and water that are not regarded as alive in dominant white culture. Kimmerer recounts how, in the process of learning Ojibwe language, what English commonly portrays as “dead” nouns like “hill” or “bay” becomes verbs—“to be a hill” or “to be a bay”—implying the “animacy of the world.”⁶⁵ The very syntactical structure conveys new possible relations. Paula Gunn Allen describes the Laguna Pueblo view that “We are

⁶¹McCarty et al., “Hear Our Languages, Hear Our Voices,” 164–66.

⁶² McCarty et al., 166–67.

⁶³ Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, 33.

⁶⁴ Koonsmo and Pacheco, “Violence on the Land, Violence on Our Bodies: Building an Indigenous Response to Environmental Violence.”

⁶⁵ Kimmerer, “Braiding Sweetgrass,” 77–79.

the land...It is not a means of survival...It is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real.” There is no difference, then, between healing and caretaking the earth, oneself, or one’s human relations. Tallbear expresses this in her writing, as well, claiming that as a Dakota, she sees Indigenous social and environmental movements as “caretaking kin,” in which caretaking is not simply limited to activities of “biologically-reproductive women,” but rather activity that sustains and strengthens the well-being of their peoples and relations, including water, air, land, and other-than-human relatives.⁶⁶

Thus, environmental and social protest movements like #NoDAPL simultaneously embody the sharing of cultural traditions and knowledges, acts of care and healing for communities of human and non-human beings, and explicit political resistance to the continuation of capitalist regimes. For some, the Standing Rock encampments demonstrated how the existence of Native life could be all of these things at once; Estes quotes activist Faith Spotted Eagle, who called the protests “a rebirth of a nation” in which young Native people were “living the dream.”⁶⁷ The camps included a day school, where Indigenous elders taught language, song, dance, history, and land and water defense, daily nonviolent direct action trainings led by an Oglala poet, and also, at heart, served to nurture and welcome people. “Many quit their full-time jobs [outside of Standing Rock], instead making it their full-time work to cook and to keep others warm and safe...generosity, wowacantognake, is a fundamental Lakota virtue,” writes Estes about his time at Standing Rock.⁶⁸

While such actions are fundamentally about life-making, in every vivid and vital sense of the word, the threat that such cultural, reproductive, defiant labor presents to existing capitalist and settler colonialist structures of power has been met like many other such labors are: through militarized police action. Some of the most viral images circulated from Standing Rock have been scenes of confrontation, where police, military, and private security “wage[d] low-level warfare” against nonviolent, unarmed people in prayer using everything from explosive teargas grenades to water cannons and sound cannons; protesters were referred to as “terrorists” by private contracted security forces and “evil” by local county police, racialized and degraded as primitive, wounded and arrested en masse.⁶⁹

Like others whose social reproduction exists in opposition to the continuity of capitalism, however, Indigenous protesters at Standing Rock and in other movements also see their actions as more than any singular contestation. They were and remain engaged in acts of world-making—the encampments, for example, provided free food, education, health care, legal aid, and centered Indigenous lifeways—physically creating a future outside capitalist logic in the present, if only temporarily in one place. They drew from Indigenous histories and traditions to not just imagine, but demonstrate and demand, alternative worlds based on justice and liberation, on Indigenous kinship relations that entail bonds between all kinds of people and those we share our world with, whether animal or land, on an earth free of capitalist regimes and ways of thinking.

⁶⁶ TallBear, “Badass (Indigenous) Women Caretake Relations.”

⁶⁷ Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, 76.

⁶⁸ Estes, 78.

⁶⁹ Wong and Levin, “Standing Rock Protesters Hold out against Extraordinary Police Violence”; Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, 79.

CONCLUSION

Social reproduction theory, more so than other political theories of care, offers a compelling political economic explanation for *why* neoliberal crises of care exist instead of simply stating that capitalism undervalues care labor, or that gendered thinking about care responsibilities results in exploitation of women's labor. Social reproduction feminists' observations about how reproductive needs are minimized to more efficiently serve labor exploitation, in gendered and racialized ways, accurately describes the experiences of millions of low-wage workers and their families. Most recently, the necessary-but-contradictory relationship between reproduction and production can be observed in the patchwork of slapdash policies that temporarily sought to ease pressures on reproduction during the pandemic—unemployment assistance, free coronavirus care, the boosted child tax credit and efforts to subsidize childcare—so people could survive. That is, just until economic fears drove policymakers to withdraw these supports and rushed people back to work.

However, this picture is incomplete in two key ways.

First, contemporary SRT misses how capitalism depends on not just subjecting life to labor exploitation, but also systems of social control that create death where necessary for accumulation. Social reproduction in low-income communities of color has long been in crisis because the lives of people in these communities have been considered in excess of capital's labor needs, an obstacle to and drain on resources for capital, or active threats to a racialized social order that maintains racial capitalist power—or all of the above. Black feminists and writers of color have, for decades, pointed out how the construction of their communities as disposable has been used to minimize their biological and social reproduction and thus, to maintain white capitalist dominance. While historically targeted at poor Black and brown people, poor white people have also increasingly been rendered expendable in expansions of mass incarceration and during the opioid crisis. In this context, then, an economy structured by necropolitics may eventually have little use for most forms of life and reproduction altogether. Understanding how capitalism manufactures death and represses threats to its continuation is key for a broader understanding of the forces squeezing life in general, and especially in marginalized communities whose experiences remain undertheorized.

This understanding also opens our eyes to reproductive labor which seeks to sustain life in communities deemed expendable, and thus operates directly in contradiction to capital. Rather than recreating the conditions of its own subjugation, as social reproduction feminists describe reproduction which sustains labor, these forms of reproduction sustain *life* in ways that resist racial capitalist domination in crucial ways. It is these forms of reproductive labor that we may all increasingly turn to in the face of expanding necropolitical power.

In marginalized, low-income communities of color across America, people perform labors of love and care with agency, sustaining life for themselves, their families, and their communities while actively combatting the reaches of racial capitalism. Social reproduction as resistance can take many forms. Some are daily, seemingly small and unremarkable actions—calling someone in prison, bringing a friend a clean syringe, teaching a child that their life is precious, singing a hymn for one's church, or speaking one's native language. I hope this paper has shown that each of these acts, although some are more commonly regarded as gestures of care than others, are social reproductive acts that work to sustain life not just physically, but in will, spirit, and soul. Within systems of oppression designed to manufacture both physical and social death, the ability of people and communities to know their humanity, to continue onto each day yearning for something better, to be truly alive, defies capitalism in small but important ways.

Other forms of reproduction are more recognizable forms of political resistance—engaging in political protest, whether against prisons, police, or pipelines, mobilizing communities to change

policies, composing protest songs and creating art that brings people together, ignoring or purposefully violating laws that allow for the destruction of life. Although these actions are not typically thought of as forms of care, they are necessary labors for people and communities to stay alive. For some, like mothers whose children are in prison, or drug user activists whose friends are physically far away, political action is often one of the only ways they can provide meaningful care to those they love. For others, like Indigenous peoples whose lives are deeply intertwined with caretaking of the earth, or Black communities where the fight for freedom is as essential to keeping children alive as feeding and clothing them, such explicitly political resistance has long been understood as a fierce expression of love for one's kin.

This paper is an attempt to center these labors, quiet and loud alike, and how they contribute to envisioning new and better futures, and actualizing these futures in our present. I am not seeking to romanticize these actions, to suggest that they are revolutionary enough to render the end of capital inevitable, or to naively cast love as the solution to all our problems. However, I do want to emphasize that love and care work *can* fuel the struggle against racist, capitalist exploitation and oppression, especially in cases where that work is especially difficult and targeted as a threat. Whether abolitionists or anti-drug war activists, Black mothers fighting for their children's futures, or Indigenous protesters fighting to keep alive the ways of knowing and relating from past generations, all of these communities are united by the pursuit of a world in which life is, without exception, precious. Throughout this paper, these different groups all elaborate and enact new definitions of care and community, love and agency, justice and freedom. As we move forward in political theorizing that seeks to expose and counter oppressive power, I hope we learn from the people who are already, through their love-as-agency, showing us that resistance to capital's war on life is possible because they have lived and will continue to live resistance every day, and that a world beyond capital is within our grasp because they have already and will continue to create spaces where—however brief or small—capital has no power.

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