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## Critical Exchange

# The politics of care

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**Abstract** Editors Rachel Brown and Deva Woodly bring together Mara Marin, Shatema Threadcraft, Christopher Paul Harris, Jasmine Syedullah, and Miriam Ticktin to examine the question: what would be required for care to be an ethic and political practice that orients people to a new way of living, relating, and governing? The answer they propose is that a 21st-century approach to the politics of care must aim at unmaking racial capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, the carceral state, and the colonial present. The politics of care is an approach to political thought and action that moves beyond the liberal approach which situates care as a finite resource to be distributed among autonomous individuals, or as a necessarily feminine virtue. Instead, those elucidating the politics of care for the contemporary era draw on rich interdisciplinary traditions and social movements to theorize and practice care as an inherently interdependent survival strategy, a foundation for political organizing, and a prefigurative politics for building a world in which all people can live and thrive.

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Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions about the politics of care have proliferated within and beyond the academy. This welcome attention to care demands we revisit care in the context of ongoing and new forms of state violence. The present moment invites a re-engagement with care as a political theory, an ethic and a political praxis that reorients people toward new ways of living, relating, and governing. The 21st-century approach to the politics of care aims at unmaking racial capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, the carceral state, and the colonial present. The politics of care is an approach to political thought and action that moves beyond the liberal approach which situates care as a finite resource to be distributed among autonomous individuals, or as a necessarily feminine virtue. Instead, those elucidating the politics of care for the contemporary era draw on rich interdisciplinary traditions and social movements to theorize and practice care as an inherently interdependent survival strategy, a foundation for political organizing, and a prefigurative politics for building a world in which all people can live and thrive.

The political theoretic genealogies that the authors of this exchange draw from include Black Feminisms, Indigenous and Decolonial Feminisms, and Social Reproduction Theory. These contributions argue that a politics of care seeks not only to exceed 20th century liberal frameworks but also to elaborate an abolitionist orientation that is capable of diagnosing, undoing, and building new political horizons. As an ethic, care does more than require a posture of mutual respect, responsibility, and obligation between individuals. As Christopher Paul Harris states in this Critical Exchange, ‘the only horizon of an ethics of care is a world



undone’ – that is, ‘extracting ourselves and each other from the ideas, values, and institutions of Western modernity.’ Yet each contribution also suggests how a radical abolitionist politics of care is immanent within the present world – whether in maroon communities, public speeches at BLM actions, communal kitchens, or migrant organizing against borders, globally. Care is a collection of principles, practices, and laws that facilitate communal gathering and the governance of polities. The abolitionist politics of care takes as its central remit and function the self and community determination, provision, and distribution of responsibilities that is *always* required for human life. Therefore, the contributions that follow build non-ideal theories of care that see contemporary and historical liberation struggles as not only a gateway to but also preparation for a different kind of politics, one presenting us with new possibilities for living together.

The politics of care described here is not wholly new. Theorists of care enter the disciplinary conversation bearing the lessons of strains of political theory that have always been present but have often been marginalized. This tradition has presented care as an ethic, a relation, a form of labor, an element of cultural reproduction, and a building-block towards non-capitalist and non-dominative social relations. At the same time, we recognize that notions of care have often been paternalistic, dominative, and even violent. Joan Tronto’s foundational work calls our attention to the inequalities perpetuated by care, whether in the form of racialized and gendered worker/employer relations, or the replacement of democratic commitments with neoliberal market logics (Tronto, 1993). Held (1993) suggests how care is a political project beyond the interpersonal, while Gould (2004) applies this position to the global. Mignon Duffy (2005) shows how care, when conceived of as ‘nurturance,’ prioritizes white women to the exclusion of women of color. Patricia Hill Collins shows how an ‘ethic of caring’ is needed to undo ‘Eurocentric masculinist’ epistemologies through the centering of Black women’s concrete experiences, emotions, and knowledge claims (1990, p. 765). Kittay (1999), Nussbaum (2007) and Simplican (2015) examine care through the perspective of disability and dependency, while Engster (2006) connects debates on care to animal welfare. Feminist political theorists have called for greater attention to the concrete, embodied specificities of women as carers and (re)productive laborers beyond a universal, disembodied conceptualization of citizenship and a public/private heuristic (Hirschmann, 1992; Threadcraft, 2016; Young, 1990). Others have examined the politics of care and the transformation of “‘common sense” logic’ in the arenas of social movements and democratic societies (Woodly, 2015, p. 5) and welfare retrenchment.

Beyond political theory, as an institutionally inscribed and politically constituted field of knowledge, care has long been theorized expansively as a resource for mutual aid, a colonial discourse, a method of non-capitalist world-building, a non-biological kinship arrangement, a collective survival strategy, a liberation politics, and a non-exploitative relation to land. Uma Narayan highlights ‘the self-serving



collaboration between elements of colonial rights discourse and care discourse' (1995, p. 133), while Dean Spade positions mutual aid as 'an often devalued iteration of radical collective care' allowing us to re-envision what is politically imaginable (2020a, b, p. 131). Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) calls for interlocking 'care webs' through a queer-of-color and disability studies lens, while in 1988 Audre Lorde famously called care for oneself 'an act of political warfare' in the context of anti-Black violence, misogyny and homophobia. Parvati Raghuram (2016) argues for a 'multiplicity in care ethics' beyond the Global North, and indigenous feminist scholars Melanie Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy see care as a form of 'radical relationality' with human and non-human life alike (2018, p. 2).

Beyond the academy, collective care is a site of mutual aid, consciousness raising, and political organizing. The abundant examples include ACT UP organizing around HIV/AIDS, the Black Panther Free Breakfast for Children Program, Zapatista practices of community self-organization, and Palestinian food distribution programs under Israeli settler colonialism. Abolitionist organizers have used existing mutual aid networks to provide hygiene supplies to incarcerated populations since the onset of COVID-19, advocating the release of vulnerable individuals from prison as one step towards a dismantling of the carceral system.

The contributions included in this Critical Exchange draw on such examples to make normative claims about an abolitionist, anti-dominative horizon of care that is already immanent within radical spaces of organizing and political transformation. If Tronto's path-breaking work (2013) points us to the lack of 'caring institutions' under late capitalism, our contributors build on and expand this theme, asking how various institutions themselves have been historically constituted by racism, colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, and cisheteropatriarchy. Going further, the contributors ask what kinds of questions and commitments would be required to unmake institutions to deliver more just relations of power and structural conditions. They use care as a method – a mode of systematic analysis, planning, and action – to identify, understand, and change the way we assess and engage the world we share, within and beyond the state. Stylistically varied and drawing on a range of genealogical traditions, they illuminate the necessity of theorizing the political beyond the bounds of abstracted ideal theory. They explore care as a practice that commons the reproductive tasks required for collective survival against state disinvestment and violence. They position care as an epistemic commitment addressing historic and ongoing forms of misrecognition. Finally, they inspire crucial questions about the places where care, rather than violence, is distributed; collective care as a form of place making; and how racialized and gendered spaces prescribe what gets counted as care.

Mara Marin begins our Critical Exchange by observing that, though the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the necessity of care in all its forms, there is a contradiction at the heart of modern ideologies of governance, encouraging people and polities to



applaud care while disparaging and/or misrecognizing its material value. Marin asserts that this misrecognition rests on a conceptual division between ‘menial and spiritual’ labor which maps onto and maintains a gendered and racialized division of care. Shatema Threadcraft argues, along with abolitionists like Davis, Gilmore, and Kaba that mass incarceration represents a colossal failure of collective care in both principle and practice. She illustrates this lack by exploring the example of ‘the sexual assault to juvenile detention pipeline,’ a phenomenon that subjects girls and women who have been victims of abuse to carceral punishment – rather than providing systems of support that could contribute to the recognition of the very conditions that produce their predicament and remedies that would enable them to live free and self-determined lives. Christopher Paul Harris highlights the sharp limitations of any ethics of care that does not purposely identify and divest from anti-Blackness, racial capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy. He emphasizes that a useful ethic of care cannot be built on sentiment but must be invested in unsettling and undoing totalizing systems of knowledge that socially construct, politically maintain, and theoretically justify ‘the suffering of others.’ Miriam Ticktin underscores the immanence of this necessary undoing in our current politics. She suggests how a ‘decolonial feminist commons’ is a space of non-hierarchical care, respect, and mutuality where people, through their collective work, make living possible outside, and in defiance of, institutions that bar them from being able to care for themselves and others – including the institution of private property. Importantly, the commons are places where notions of deservingness are irrelevant because people’s entitlement to the means of living are not proscribed by their comportment, social status, legal citizenship, or other factors routinely disqualifying people from the narrow circle of neoliberal care. Care, by these lights, is material, practical and independent of moral dispositions. Jasmine Syedullah concludes this Critical Exchange with a meditation on abolitionist care as a classroom pedagogy, which draws on traditions in Black feminist thought to explore what she calls ‘congregational care’ methods of being and learning together. This form of care asks people to lean into their lived experience, embrace an improvisational orientation, and understand the essential and deeply generative space created when we admit that we do not know with certainty how to undo the world that creates structural conditions of suffering for most people, most of the time. In productive conversation with Threadcraft, this contribution suggests the limitations of political recognition, which requires legitimation by – and legibility to – the state, as a constitutively violent and anti-Black formation.

Taken together, these contributions set a new horizon for the vocation of political theory. The task before us, they argue, is one of colossal import: a collaborative, collective effort to exceed the world modernity made and discover a path forward toward a contemporary era – the name of which we do not yet know – based on the mutually affirmed conviction that we must make the road toward more just power relations and more flourishing societies, by leaning into our questions,



relying on abolitionist principles, and discovering through imagination and improvisation, a practicable politics of care.

Rachel Brown and Deva Woodly

## **The racial division of carework and the devaluation of care**

Last spring, amid the uncertainty and insecurity created by the COVID-19 crisis, one thing seemed clear: the importance of care, in its many forms, and the dependence of our societies on it. From the emotional support, we could no longer receive from meeting with friends and family, to the new relationships we created with neighbors, from the essential work we gratefully received from bus drivers, immigrant agricultural workers, and workers in extended care facilities and grocery stores, it became clear that care comes in many forms and is essential for the basic functioning of our societies. From the public acknowledgement of the work of nurses, doctors, hospital janitors, and nurse aids to the immense burden felt by parents as they tried to work from home, homeschooling their children while supporting their mental health and need for physical exercise, it seemed that the veil that had made the work of care invisible was finally lifting. Suddenly, it was publicly and intimately felt that care work – by which I mean any human activity that supports life, in the sense of a good life rather than just survival – is crucially important to everything else we do. Among the loud pan banging to thank essential workers, to hearts displayed in windows across North America, there was reason to hope that our societies would no longer take for granted that care flows naturally, or that it reaches all the right places without social support. There was also reason to hope that our societies would no longer treat those who provide care as low skilled, deserving of low pay and low social status.

Yet, a year later, a certain familiar ambivalence towards care is back. On the one hand, parents' need for childcare is still publicly acknowledged. On the other hand, it is not accompanied by an acknowledgement that care workers are among the lowest paid, least protected workers. For example, the Biden administration justifies its proposal to provide free, high-quality universal pre-school childcare for all three- and four-year-olds as support for working parents, especially working mothers, not as a long-overdue increase in the pay of childcare workers. Given that the Biden administration has dropped legislation that would have raised the federal minimum wage, and in the absence of a robust public understanding of the demands of care on its workers and the important benefits care provides, there is little reason to think that care workers will be treated any differently in the future. If we add that hopes for a world without the pandemic are expressed as hopes for the world before the pandemic – rather than for a world transformed by the pandemic into one with a different, more just organization of care – we find little reason to



think otherwise. And still, care continues to be more visible, i.e., visible enough to motivate the Biden administration's relatively bold proposal.

What explains this ambivalence? How shall we understand the fact that, when it comes to care, we are able to both discursively acknowledge its value and devalue its workers? The answer, I contend, has to do with the organization of care along racial and gender lines, and in particular, the ideological formation responsible for the position of women of color within it. My understanding of care is related to the notion of social reproduction as discussed by socialist feminists. Social reproduction refers to the activities that create and sustain human subjects, both on a daily basis and intergenerationally (Glenn, 1992, p. 1). These activities sustain human beings as embodied beings, while also constituting them as social beings. They involve creating and maintaining social meanings, building social relations and sustaining communities, and take place in a variety of spaces, settings and institutions, both public and private, and in all societies.

I argue that our understanding of social reproduction is distorted by an ideology that frames care as divided into menial, 'dirty' tasks and nurturant, spiritual tasks. This menial/spiritual split is responsible for the fact that women of color, often immigrant women, do most of the lowest paid, most demanding jobs of care (Glenn, 2010, p. 4). It is also an outgrowth of the 19th century ideology of femininity that justified white bourgeois women's confinement to the home, and the separation between home and market. Analyzing the menial/spiritual split reveals that while white women and women of color occupy opposite positions in the hierarchy of care work, these positions are interconnected, both resulting from developments in the ideology of femininity that accompanied the rise of capitalism and justified the development of a separate sphere of the home. The menial/spiritual split has stabilized – by instituting the racial division of care work – the home/market divide against its self-generated contradictions, and has, thus, contributed to the devaluation of not only work designated as 'menial' and relegated to women of color but also of 'spiritual' forms of care. Moreover, the spiritual/menial split mischaracterizes the nature of care work by obscuring the fact that housework is simultaneously both. This symbolic construction of care as divided between hard, undesirable tasks and meaningful, desirable tasks continues to condition our misperception of care work and to justify the contradictory tendencies to sentimentalize care while materially undervaluing it.

Marxist feminist scholars have shown that the separation between productive work and reproductive, or caring work is a relatively recent phenomenon, associated with the rise of capitalism and its need to produce and reproduce labor power. Begun in the late 15th century with the expropriation of the peasantry from the commons, this process – which encountered vigorous resistance – was only partly completed in the 19th century when the 'modern family,' with the full-time housewife doing unpaid reproductive labor in the home, was generalized to the working class in England and later in the US (Federici, 2014; Folbre, 1991).



On this account, women's coercion into social reproduction is a product of this process of separation between productive and reproductive work and of the women's exclusion from the wage. In a social world where survival depends on access to a wage, women's constrained access to employment requires them to become housewives, responsible for social reproductive work and subordinated to the male head of the household through whom they gain indirect access to a wage. In the process, their work gets redefined as love, not work (Federici, 2014).

This separate sphere arrangement served capitalism and capital accumulation by extracting women's labor – made invisible under the designation of 'care' – and transferring its value to capital, by ensuring the reproduction of labor power on a daily basis and from one generation to the next, by disciplining the male worker (Federici, 2012, p. 17) and by isolating workers in their private families, rendering solidarity impossible (Davis, 2000, pp. 168–169). Women's work in the home is then central to the functioning of the capitalist system even as it is segregated to the presumably separate sphere of the home, and women's domination by men ultimately serves the interests of capital (Federici, 2012).

However, this model of the full-time housewife was never extended to women of color in the US (Threadcraft, 2016). They were forced to work outside the home, not excluded from the wage. During slavery, Black women were forced to work as hard as Black men to profit their enslavers, and after slavery, when the racial dual labor systems assigned men of color to occupations that did not pay enough to support a family, to support their families (Davis, 1981, p. 5; Davis, 2000, p. 172; Glenn, 1991, p. 1337) As a result, men and women of color were mutually dependent and similarly impacted by the inadequate level of overall family income in a colonial labor system (Glenn, 1985, p. 103). To a large extent, women of color were employed as domestic servants in middle-class households (Glenn, 1991, 1992) and as such were subordinated to white families, who benefited from their work.

This made the position of women of color in the organization of labor and their relation to the separate sphere of the home very different from that of white middle-class women (Glenn, 1985), and they did not fit the standards of femininity that evolved in the 19th century (Davis, 1981, p. 5). Nevertheless, I argue that their subordinated position in the structure of care work was directly related to those ideological standards of femininity that excluded them, to the productive/reproductive split justified by those standards, and to the position of white women within that split that was dictated by that ideology of femininity. It is this ideology that continues to haunt our misrepresentations of the value of care.

Casting women as fragile beings of a superior spiritual and moral nature unsuitable for the market, this ideology justified the productive/reproductive split (Roberts, 1997a, p. 55). It also expanded white middle-class women's domestic obligations by contributing to the cult of domesticity, emphasizing women's roles as nurturing mothers, and creating higher standards of cleanliness within the larger





process of the sentimentalization of the family as a ‘haven in a heartless world’ (Glenn, 1992, p. 7). This new elaboration of their reproductive responsibilities created a problem for middle-class women. Not only did their reproductive responsibilities expand, the vast amount of hard labor in the housework was also now in conflict with the image of the fragile woman they were supposed to embody. The solution was to separate the ‘menial’ from the ‘spiritual’ aspects of housework and to relegate the former to women of color, recent immigrants, and working-class women who were hired to perform most of the hard and undesirable tasks of household work (Glenn, 1992, pp. 6–7). But adopting this solution had two effects, both of which contributed to our ambivalent attitude towards care and solidified its racial divisions. First, by adopting the menial/spiritual split, white women endorsed the denial of materiality implicit in this ideology of femininity. The problem faced by white women was that their role was ideologically defined in a way that came into conflict with the material reality of their role. Their elaboration of the ideology through the menial/spiritual split introduced an ambivalence towards work that is inescapably material and embodied, yet valued only for its non-material aspects. While the ideology seemed to elevate care, it simultaneously communicated that its essential materiality is problematic, creating an ambivalence that continues to reverberate in our public understandings of care.

Second, they also elaborated this ideology of femininity as a racial ideology. By elaborating the domestic code around the menial/spiritual split, they contributed to an ideology that denies the capacity of women of color for spiritual housework and feeds into images of Black mothers as unfit for motherhood (Roberts, 1997a, p. 62). They also created a hierarchical division between white women and women of color among care workers, which continued when large parts of the work of social reproduction moved from the household to the market in the second part of the twentieth century (Glenn, 1992), and which continues to structure the current organization of care.

This racial division within the work of care enabled white women to hold positions of power by being associated with the meaningful, elevated aspects of care, by enabling them to join the workforce and by occupying the positions of power and responsibility in the workplace. However, while white women received and continue to receive benefits from this hierarchy of work, I contend that these benefits come at a cost. The cost is that the menial/spiritual split contributes to the devaluation of all women’s work of care and continues to feed our ambivalent attitude toward care. It does so in two ways.

First, the menial/spiritual split stabilizes the home/market separation against the problems it generates, and consequently the devaluation of care that follows from that separation, including the devaluation of the so-called ‘spiritual’ work of care. Without separating the hard labor of the housework from the nurturant aspects of motherhood and transferring the former to women of color, white women would not have been able to enact in practice the ideology of the fragile, spiritual woman



that supported the home/market separation, and thus, the process that placed their labor outside the sphere of real work. In accepting the menial/spiritual split, white women accepted and buttressed the home/market split and their position in it.

Moreover, by accepting and contributing to the endurance of the home/market split through their endorsement of the menial/spiritual split, white women also contributed to the endurance of the capitalist system that relies on these interconnected separations. To the degree to which we continue to accept these interconnected ideological separations responsible for the devaluation of care, we too buttress the capitalist system, and thus, the devaluation of the work of all workers.

Second, the spiritual/menial split mischaracterizes the nature of care work that all women do, obscuring the real value it creates, which in turn supports the processes of devaluation of care. By accepting the split, women accepted to be separated from the physical aspect of care, and thus, from claiming the full value of their work. Separating ‘menial,’ from ‘spiritual’ tasks obscures the fact that housework is simultaneously both; it is ‘an inseparable combination of manual labor and social nurturing’ (Roberts, 1997a, p. 79). It is labor of love that involves manual labor. Care answers needs and particular needs at particular moments. That has a mental aspect, as needs have to be interpreted, understood in their particular demands, and as they change (Marin, 2014, pp. 341–342). But it also has a physical aspect, as needs are embodied. Through the work of care, children are clothed, cleaned, and fed. A particular set of cultural standards is involved in any clothing, cleaning of feeding. Any labor that answers needs enacts cultural norms and contributes to their maintenance. It is work that involves physical as well as spiritual labor.

Continuing to enact this ideology is not the only possible response available to us, as it was not the only possible response available to white women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before the Civil War, feminists were advocating for a joint property regime based on the value of wives’ household labor, which they only abandoned after the Civil War in favor of the argument that women could only achieve equality with men by working outside the home for a wage (Siegel (1994), cited in Roberts, 1997a, p. 77). It is also not the response of Black communities, who have instead developed extended, multi-generational families, which incorporated members beyond those related by blood (Davis, 2000, p. 169; Roberts, 1997b, p. 53). We could abandon our ambivalence towards care and instead embrace care as an embodied labor of love that connects social meaning making to care of bodies, and that reveals the communal nature of carework, the connections we inevitably find ourselves in as beings who need care.

Mara Marin



## Mass incarceration and public care

Prison abolitionists have called the phenomenon of mass incarceration many things. Angela Davis sees the prison as representing a failure to confront our social problems (2003). Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues that prisons are a spatial/geographic solution to political, economic, and environmental problems (2007). Prisons, she says, represent a response to changes in industrial investment and natural disasters wherein men of color and poor white men in the prime of life, for whom there are no longer jobs, are moved out of urban centers and into former agricultural lands. One of the most compelling cases they make against incarceration is that it represents a collective failure of care.

What we have come to call ‘mass incarceration’ has its roots in our post-Civil Rights criminalization of Black and brown urban space in response to collective mobilization for racial equality and our investments in policing and prisons as a way to manage ‘the material manifestations of joblessness, a lack of access to healthcare, failing schools and subpar housing’ and the targeting of Black and brown communities for militarized overpolicing. (Hinton, 2021). The fact that punishment is the default solution to a broad array of social problems is evident in what has been named the ‘sexual assault to prison pipeline’ wherein young Black survivors of sexual assault are not offered counseling but are instead imprisoned in youth detention facilities. It is evident in the fact that Black caretakers, who often are forced to choose among bad housing options in under-resourced communities, are often survivors of unpunished housing crimes. They are, then, not only disproportionately targeted for eviction, but they are surveilled and punished, often when they are, again, survivors of harm, including intimate partner violence. It could be otherwise. We could offer people in under-resourced communities the things that have been proven to decrease violence and harm, we could devote resources to preventing harm and not simply punishing it: adequate housing, mental and physical health care, flexible childcare and flexible and proximate jobs that recognize and support the disproportionate caregiving work that Black women provide. We should also be sure to allow communities to participate in the processes by which we determine what they themselves need. In short, we could follow the advice of abolitionists.

What if we change the frame about the appropriate way to deal with harm? Approaches to addressing harm that are focused on making survivors lives better rather than making perpetrators lives worse would demand a comprehensive rethinking of what constitutes justice in theory and practice. As it is, our society expends far more time and resources on the punishment and criminalization of not only perpetrators but also survivors and rarely acknowledges the ways that these categories can overlap. This is rooted in our collective decisions to individualize responsibility for harm rather than taking collective responsibility to change the



social contexts in which (disproportionately racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic) harm takes place – rather than focusing our efforts on meeting the needs of survivors collectively and taking the time to consider, again collectively, what might make their lives better and decrease their exposure to future harm. Our tendency to resource punishment over care is not only a moral problem – it is indeed wrong – it is also a political one. Luckily, we have significant untapped resources in our midst. Political theorists, following the lead of the great Iris Marion Young (2011), must look to abolitionist social movements and their models for how communities can come together to meet survivor needs and think about the best design for institutions of collective care.

There is perhaps no better illustration of mass incarceration as a failure to provide care than ‘the sexual assault to juvenile detention pipeline.’ Malika Saada Saar et al write that, ‘The most common crimes for which girls are arrested – including running away, substance abuse, and truancy – are also the most common symptoms of abuse. Indeed, child sexual abuse experts list these behaviors as warning signs that an adolescent has been abused and needs therapeutic intervention’ (2019, p. 9). Our society’s impulse to punish and not protect is not simply a problem for young girls. Kimberlé Crenshaw draws attention to the role intimate partner violence and the hyperregulation of public housing plays in driving Black women’s incarceration (2012). Many Black women are in jail as a result of the War on Drugs. They are often guilty by association and very often survivors of male violence (Mustakeem 2014). The mainstream anti-violence movement, she says, has no interest in them. It is also unclear how well the women would fair if said movement did take an interest in the violence they experience. As Beth Richie has argued, the mainstream anti-violence movement’s carceral turn, their ‘uncritical positioning around state policy and punitive interventions’ have contributed to an ‘ongoing escalation of male violence against Black women’ (2014, p. 326). Even in a context of alleged concern about the problem of violence against women – public campaigns against human trafficking, for example – there is clearly no care. Survivors are far more likely to be prosecuted than the perpetrators in these human trafficking cases. On the issue of housing, an issue situated within a wider cultural context where women bear greater responsibility for caring for children and other dependents, Black women are survivors of unpunished housing discrimination crimes, crimes that lead them into hyperregulated public housing and, thus, put them at the mercy of a housing subsidy surveillance regime that includes both police and neighborhood watch.

We have a society that distributes violence and not care. This commitment to distributing violence not only increases the levels of interpersonal violence that Black women confront but presents considerable obstacles to their ability to do the privatized and community care work they are tasked with, a burden that is made heavier because of the society wide turn away from care. Eviction is an important example of this phenomenon, as our laws and policies make survivors of violence



more likely to be evicted, threatening the family security and stability that Black women are unduly encumbered with providing, and they also conscript landlords and neighbors into state surveillance work, facilitating the breakdown of communities and discouraging mutual aid.

The disproportionate violence Black people experience is itself rooted in centuries of unanswered recognition claims: Black people have not been recognized as equal self-determining agents; they have been misrecognized, stereotyped, and criminalized. Black equality claims have been met with criminalization and state violence, first in the post-Emancipation ‘worse than slavery’ period and, second, in response to the modern civil rights movement. Heather Ann Thompson (2010) argues that the rise of the carceral state – a phenomenon worthy of our attention as it has been central to the decline of the power of organized labor, the recent rightward drift in our politics and to our mid-20th century urban crises – was driven by the criminalization of urban space, space criminalized in response to Black demands for equal citizenship. A key mechanism of said criminalization was drug legislation. Elizabeth Hinton, too, sees mass incarceration as a response to the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and as a response to Black urban rebellions, rebellions in which Blacks, again, protested their unequal treatment and misrecognition (2017, 2021). Those rebellions, she holds, were key in moving liberals from a critique of poverty to an embrace of crime control. Drugs were, Hinton writes, a pretext for greater government involvement in low-income communities, as the federal government collapsed ending discrimination and ending poverty into the necessity of ‘fighting crime.’

Criminalization and incarceration represent an ongoing misrecognition, one that has delivered political products in the forms of practices, policy, and law, which are rooted in the idea that Black people require distinct forms of social control because they are beings of a different kind. Conversely, recognition is what is necessary to move us from incarceration to care, and to date, social movements are the best vehicle in existence for achieving something approaching genuine recognition in societies marked by misrecognition, including in our multi-racial democracy characterized by long-standing racial and gender hierarchies and the stereotypes they generate. Misrecognition has led our society to distribute disproportionate violence to the misrecognized; recognition is a crucial step in building a society characterized by public care. As it happens, many of the social movements organized around building caring communities, in fact, have done much to facilitate bringing about genuine recognition for the most marginalized in our society. They have done so by creating a space for the misrecognized to engage in storytelling that allows them to be recognized on their own terms.

Deva Woodyly argues that social movements are necessary to democracy, as such, and particularly to the possibility of multi-racial democracy in a nation long stamped by group-based oppression. They are, she says, democracy’s fifth estate. Woodyly argues that social movements change our associations, public



understandings and the scope of political possibility (Woodly, 2015). One fascinating way in which they do so is by creating space within the dominant public sphere that allows oppressed people to engage in storytelling about themselves and their experiences, in self-authorship in the dominant public sphere. Through social movements, oppressed people become a part of authoring the values by which we all collectively live. Recently, Black people have come to author themselves, name themselves in a movement that has called on us to say the names of our dead.

Woodly cites Jeremy Sawyer and Anup Gampa's work, which states that social movements are the only phenomena that have been successful in changing society-wide attitudes. In addition to the critically important role they play in developing long-neglected political capacities among marginalized peoples, they alone are capable of creating new associations with the groups participating in them and can change observers' implicit evaluations of the group. They are capable of such changes in a way that exposure to exceptional individuals, like Barack Obama, are not.

Speech appears to play an important role in bringing about these changes. Woodly writes:

BLM rallies, interviews and media coverage have given Black people the opportunity to directly voice their opinions on race, racism and racial issues. This is potentially significant because listening to opinions, expressed through speech, seems to increase the likelihood that individuals will attribute human-like qualities to those expressing the opinion – even if they do not currently share that opinion (Woodly, 2021).

This is interesting. As the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) has transformed from a movement for police reform to an avowedly abolitionist one, to a push towards care and away from cops, we must reflect on the importance of storytelling in this process and devote resources to said storytelling, as this form of public speech appears crucial to getting us to a place of public care.

I should note that Mariame Kaba's organizing work contains elements of all that I have highlighted in this piece. Much of what is compelling about Kaba's work, for example, is that it is survivor-, and not perpetrator-centered, and it is focused on how collectives can respond to survivor needs. For example, in one landmark case in Chicago, a 20-year history of police torture at hidden sites took place in the 1970s and 1980s under the command of Jon Burge. Though Burge was charged and convicted of these crimes long after the fact, what is most interesting about this episode is that activists and organizers successfully won reparations for surviving victims of police torture and their descendants (Stafford 2015). In addition to cash payments of up to \$100,000 for survivors (Baker 2019), the reparations settlement addresses the issue of knowledge production. As a part of the 2015 settlement, descendants of survivors will be guaranteed free tuition at any public city or state



university that they choose to attend. Most importantly, there will be a public memorial and a requirement that students in public schools and colleges will be taught about the long-running torture scheme. It, therefore, will change the stories told about policing and police violence as a way to facilitate the recognition of the humanity of all survivors.

We must also recognize that all Black people do not have equal access to this recognition-affirming storytelling, for many reasons, including our dominant, masculinist frames regarding racial violence and Black men's greater control over the means of symbolic production, which includes the symbolic dominance of lynching in the stories of Black peoplehood and what Kristie Dotson has called 'epistemic oppression' (2014). Kimberlé Crenshaw implores us to attend to the flaws in our storytelling and she speaks of a need to redistribute narrative capital and expand our narrative frames, so that Black women's stories of violence resonate and are amplified both in Black counterpublic spheres and dominant publics as much as Black male stories currently do (2012). This narrative redistribution might enable those stories to go on to occasion equal political mobilization. Without this, she says, we will fail to see the sites of mass incarceration beyond the prison, including in public housing and welfare offices. Without this, we may fail to care adequately for those who disproportionately provide care among us. We must resource and amplify caregiver storytelling just as we give resources to abolitionist experiments in offering care and not punishment.

Yet caregiver storytelling is very often survivor storytelling. So, it is necessary to resource storytelling while recognizing the ways in which storytelling often burdens survivors of gender-based violence in particular. As much of the violence against Black women in our society goes unreported and unrecognized, here the aspect of public acknowledgement and education in reparation for harm is key. Such provisions can improve the lives of survivors, facilitating greater survivor recognition, without requiring their individual testimony, which often seems to put survivors on trial for the harm done to them. This is extremely important, as we know that very few survivors seek individual help from the state in our current system. This kind of intervention acknowledges that the systems we design should not depend on such individual testimony but should always commit to facilitating storytelling while providing critical care for survivors' well-being. Political theorists must be among the ranks of those considering the mechanisms and institutions through which we might best be able to do this necessary work.

Shatema Threadcraft

### **(Caring for) the world that must be undone**

The title of this contribution borrows a refrain that echoes across the pages of M. Shadee Malaklou and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard's (2018) essay 'Notes from the



Kitchen, the Crossroads, and Everywhere Else, too.’ It is a haunting provocation – the world that must be undone – meant to situate and map what they describe as the ‘vexed and generative terrain of Afropessimisms and [B]lack Feminisms.’ These modes of disruptive thought and method-making (McKittrick, 2020) critically attend, in their ways, to Blackness and Black people’s position(s) within and against the normative bounds of the prevailing order of things. I want to linger in the sense of obligation the phrase asserts, its forceful use of *must*, to frame what I take to be another ‘vexed and generative’ landscape. The present and future (im)possibilities of care and care ethics when thought from the vantage of Black critical theory, especially as we waver under the long shadow of 2020 and the ongoing catastrophe(s) that binds the current political conjuncture to the past.

My starting point in this effort invokes Joan Tronto’s (2013) first phase of care. It stipulates, perhaps unsurprisingly that we ought to care for and go about undoing the world. Which is to say, the only horizon of an ethics of care is a world undone. By undoing the world, I mean the practice and process of extracting ourselves and each other from the ideas, values, and institutions of Western modernity. In that sense, I align myself with recent calls for abolition and decolonization, which have become staples of Black and Brown-led organizing and activism in the years following the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter. At its core, to undo towards an otherwise world is to refuse our violent and totalizing system of knowledge anchored in and (re)produced by anti-Blackness, racial capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy. Call it an insurrection of the mind at the ‘blood-stained gate’ of the West. A rebellion that no longer takes for granted the legitimacy of what we’ve inherited or readily accepts entrenched ideologies that masquerade as truth. To alter ever-so-slightly the last line of a James Baldwin’s (1993) address: ‘[*They*] made the world we’re living in and *we* have to make it over.’

Animated by a desire for something else, something more, the practice and process of undoing and then remaking the world offers the possibility of a different kind of relation, an unbounded with and for on the other side of domination. I might go as far as to say it is a project that aims to bring us to what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013) refer to as the ‘beyond of politics.’ After all, as an ethos and analytic, ‘the modality of life’s constant escape’ from both coercion and captivity, Blackness troubles the very idea of politics itself. Because the primary aim of politics – to govern, ‘governance,’ which, for Moten and Harney, represents ‘the extension of whiteness on a global scale’ – carries the burdensome weight of democracy, the liberal state, and the nation, concepts produced by and that have, thus, far sustained the anti-Black and colonial logics of the Enlightenment. In other words, it is as yet impossible to disentangle politics from the protocols of racial rule (Hesse, 2017). Anti-Blackness is everywhere, and where there is anti-Blackness, there can be no politics that cares. For this reason, ‘it’s not a matter of “doing politics differently,”’ as the French anarchist collective The Invisible Committee (2018) reminds us. Care demands we ‘[do] something different from politics’ altogether. (p. 18)





If we fail to pursue such a world, one that is materially, discursively, and ideationally undone, care and care ethics will remain, as Christina Sharpe (2016, p. 5) has put it, a ‘problem for thought,’ particularly as it concerns Blackness, Black life, and the racial regimes that define them (Karerea, 2019). To be transformational, care and care ethics must fully account for the specificity of anti-Black violence and the repetition of Black death as constituent to, but located outside of, what Calvin Warren (2017, p. 391) describes as ‘the cultural space of ethics, relationality, and the sacred.’ An ethics of care needs to regard the non-relationality of Black pain (Karerea, 2019; Harris, 2019) as the bottom line that situates and organizes all forms of racialized, classed, and gendered otherings: the object to be controlled, the deviant to be suppressed, the thing to be disposed of or turned away as defined in contradistinction with the criminal mythologies of white supremacy, which requires this abjection for its coherence and preservation (Wilderson, 2020). Care and care ethics must therefore directly confront anti-Blackness and white supremacy as the foundation of the current world and the basis upon which we undo its principles towards an unseen and unknown elsewhere.

To bring this closer to the ground, consider several examples from the past 12-plus months, which represent just a snapshot of the impossibility of care as it concerns politics: the government, the law, and the legislature. According to a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report, COVID-19 related fatalities, which have now surpassed 575,000, helped drive the total number of deaths in the United States to more than 3.3 million in 2020, a spike of around 16% compared to last year (Johnson, 2021). It was the highest such increase since 1918, when the country was simultaneously engaged in war, battling a flu pandemic and spatially defined by racial segregation and acts of racial terror. (In May of that same year, Mary Turner, a Black woman, was lynched while eight months pregnant after speaking out against her husband’s lynching the day before. Her baby was cut from her womb and stomped to death. Turner was already doused with gasoline and lit on fire when her captors riddled her body with bullets.)

These COVID-19 numbers are grim on their own, particularly since health officials in the former administration have acknowledged that many, if not most of those deaths, were preventable. But they are all the more enraging if you consider their racial and class dimensions. On the one hand, large corporations like Amazon saw their profits soar throughout the pandemic. American billionaires saw their wealth dramatically increase. On the other and worse still, the distribution of loss among Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities was disproportionate, owing to the long-standing structural inequalities that make our communities more vulnerable. Taken together, COVID-19 is a ‘once in a generation’ event that makes crystal clear that Black and other marginalized people live in ongoing cycles of precarity ordained by the ‘world that must be undone,’ while the privileged profit, without any clear way out.



This cycle, of course, is one many of us have come to expect. Black people are always on the frontlines of disaster. While the pandemic raged, the country again bore witness to this world's violent and repetitive repercussions when former police officer Derrick Chauvin's knee robbed George Floyd of his life. His death, along with the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbury, Toni McDade, and others, sparked a summer of unprecedented uprisings across the United States and beyond its borders. Refrain after refrain told us that America would finally 'reckon' with its anti-Black past and address systemic racism. Yet more than a year after Floyd's death, and in the wake of several additional police killings of Black and Brown people, Black politicians from across the political spectrum told us America was, in fact, 'not a racist country' – as if blinded by a base desire to leave the great American mythos intact, no matter the deadly consequences of doing so.

In the end, Chauvin was found guilty, a rare occurrence, but there can be no justice for the dead. Nor can there be accountability since a 'bad apple' can't be held accountable if the police as an institution are at fault. And the police will never be blamed if politics will not allow those in power to see and name America and its institutions for what they are and have always been: racist and anti-Black. Regardless of intent, the widespread pronouncements of care about Black life and death in 2020 are meaningless and actual care impossible if our political culture continues to insist America is 'not a racist country.' We cannot care about or address what we refuse to see or choose to ignore.

Ironically, that appears to be the arithmetic, the 'pantomime of care,' behind the wave of new election laws proposed or enacted in Republican-led state legislatures across the country following the historic turnout in the 2020 elections. Driven by racist lies about voter 'irregularities' and fraud – mainly in predominately Black counties and districts – there are now over 360 bills aimed at in some way restricting the vote, most notoriously in Georgia. The restrictions in these bills are likely to impact Black voters the most. Nevertheless, Republican officials tell us we need them because we cannot simply *ignore* the voting irregularities of 2020, especially if we claim to care about and want to regain lost trust in 'free and fair' elections.

It is not only Black voters who are targets for disenfranchisement by the cooptation of care and its ability to reinscribe vectors of domination. Since the beginning of the year, more than 100 discriminatory anti-transgender bills, a record number, are making their way through statehouses across 33 states (Krishnakumar, 2021). These bills overwhelmingly impact trans-youth, from restricting participation in sports to gender-affirming medical care. What is worse is that they do not correspond to existing problems or concerns brought forth by community members. And in many cases, they have taken precedent over more pressing matters, particularly as it pertains to the pandemic, all in the name of 'protecting' young people. Meanwhile, transgender murders are up 100% compared to the first four months of last year. The majority of the dead are Black (Good, 2021).



An ethics of care must therefore rupture the frames that (re)produce injustice but can only accomplish this if it can apprehend the depth and source of the injury as experienced by the injured. The failure to apprehend the specificity of Black life and suffering and that of the most vulnerable has made the (im)possibility of care most acute. And it is precisely the naming of concrete harms that drives Brunella Casalini's (2020) assessment of care ethics. Against the flattening universalism that informs the ideal-moral approach to justice first articulated by John Rawls and later revised to better account for and incorporate care and care ethics, Casalini champions a non-ideal theory as a corrective methodology. This non-ideal approach centers injustice as experienced in the every day lives of a specific person or groups of people. The ability for the dominant order to hear and see epistemic violence is, in Casalini's view, fundamental to an inclusive theory of care that not only questions but completely remakes our understanding of what justice is.

Preventing the level of identification necessary to hear and see epistemic violence is the socially constructed and politically maintained ignorance one is able to assume about the suffering of others – a failure to listen that leads to an inability or unwillingness to know. Rather than facilitating a view of interdependence and responsibility as advocated by care ethicists, our 'hegemonic epistemic framework' bounds how we apply notions of worthiness to those bodies we do not or cannot identify with as like our own (p. 70). It creates the condition of possibility for othering, as such, preventing recognition as human meriting care and concern.

For Casalini, to remedy this wrong, what is needed is a democracy that is attentive to voice and difference. Such a democracy would encourage the full participation of diverse experiential knowledges. In making this case, Casalini points to what she describes as the increasingly important role of social movements in giving voice to the unheard in the arena of democratic politics. Social movements disrupt common sense (Woodly, 2008) and expand the parameters of responsibility by undoing hegemonic understanding with counter-hegemonic discourse. They offer a subversive form of storytelling, claims for recognition that create new opportunities for what Threadcraft refers to in this exchange as 'public care.'

Thinking care and injustice together as a way to trouble the meaning of justice itself is notable for its attentiveness to the structural nature of what must be undone to achieve a 'caring' society. However, what is less clear is whether care ethics fully ascertains what such an undoing would require. For all her talk of specificity, of being attentive to concrete cases, Casalini never names the hegemonic framework that she's writing against. Anti-Blackness is conspicuous in its absence. As a result, we lose the opportunity to differentiate one 'epistemic violence' from another, and to substantively deal with the multiple dimensions of ignorance used to foreclose seeing and knowing. More crucially, we overlook that the problem may not be a matter of ignorance at all.



I argue the problem is not a matter of ignorance but design, and no amount of ‘counter-hegemonic discourses’ or ‘caring to know’ will disrupt extant anti-Black institutions without undoing them altogether. Recourse to already existing concepts and practices will reproduce already existing grammars of captivity and subjection. It will not point us towards something else.

The task of undoing the world has always been a defining characteristic of Black radicalism. And it is currently one of the driving forces of M4BL, understood as both a network of organizations, organizers, and cultural workers and a defining political and cultural zeitgeist separating the current moment in Black social movement from the past. Consider the abolitionist demand to defund the police, popularized during the 2020 uprisings. It directly calls for initiating a process of undoing the police and policing. Importantly, however, defunding and abolishing the police would do more than simply eliminate a violent, anti-Black institution rooted in slavery. It would also level a forceful blow at America’s carceral logic and invite a much-needed re-imagining of what safety is and might be.

Accordingly, to defund the police would be to participate in a practice of care transformative in the here and now. Care, in this case, dismantles so it can create and let live. It lets live those who might have found themselves the recipient of a bullet, a chokehold, or a knee to the neck. In that way, it honors the dead by tending to the living (Sharpe, 2016). Through this ethics of care, the practice of undoing creates the opportunity to build what does not yet exist, a new horizon. Such a process can powerfully change how we relate to each other and ourselves, what some scholars and activists call ‘abolitionist care.’

In her essay ‘Free Us All’ Kaba (2021) opens up a space to consider efforts to support incarcerated people through defense campaigns as an ‘ethic and a practice of abolitionist care.’ For Kaba, defense campaigns offer the chance to engage ‘criminalized individuals through various tactics (including letter writing, financial support, prison visits, and more).’ In doing so, these grassroots efforts ‘connect people in a heartfelt, direct way that teaches specific lessons about the brutality of prisons’ and ‘underscores that our fates are intertwined, and our liberation is interconnected’ (p. 111). The power of defense campaigns, then, is their ability to initiate a process of undoing. A kind of abolition of the parts of ourselves tethered to the systemic carceral presuppositions we have come to accept as right and just. This collective undertaking of self-abolition, in turn, opens the door to further steps to refuse and withdraw from the racial and punitive regimes of our current episteme. To borrow from Jasmine Syedullah in this exchange, it is a way for people to ‘shed what is no longer serving them.’

Similarly, China Medel (2017) describes the work of ‘No More Deaths,’ a volunteer organization performing direct aid actions at a treacherous stretch of the US/Mexico border, as abolitionist care. Their efforts not only offer aid to migrants in need but create what she calls ‘a relational ethic of interdependency’ (p. 875). By doing so, volunteers and migrants alike come together to generate ‘a living space of



an ongoing abolitionist gesture, one in which people innovate and practice ways of protecting disavowed life' (p. 875). They 'prefigure' another world, one lacking the learned demarcations of citizen and worthiness and rejecting the 'systemic and racially distributed effects of neoliberal policy in the Americas that work to value and devalue different kinds of life' (p. 879). Like defense campaigns, the care work performed by No More Deaths provides an opportunity for volunteers to transform themselves into 'accomplices' to undo the restrictions on mobility that define the boundaries of the nation-state.

Far from an abstract idea, these examples and their approaches to abolition demonstrate that the process of undoing the world is already taking place, informed by an ethics of care that understands that a world undone is the only option to break the cycle of racial violence and precarity that situates and organizes racialized, classed and gendered otherings. They also show that extracting oneself from the logics of Western modernity is a collective enterprise in the spirit of what Miriam Ticktin describes in this exchange as a 'decolonial feminist commons.' This fugitive undertaking involves slowly but intentionally abolishing the parts of ourselves that operate according to the rules of anti-Blackness, racial capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy – to fashion ourselves anew. Ultimately, the (im)possibility of care and care ethics will hinge on our ability to not only consider, but attempt to inhabit and think from beyond the existing 'cultural space of ethics, relationality, and the sacred' (2017, p. 391). To move from the standpoint of the wake (Sharpe, 2016), which is to say, the excluded outside of Blackness, is the horizon of our future elsewhere, a world undone and remade.

Christopher Paul Harris

### **Who are we to make diamonds of coal? Or, to reorient to disorient democratic progress with 'confrontation teaching'**

How do commonplace, every day expressions of care begin to break the mold of colonial, capitalist, and carceral logics? Who do we see when we peel back the historical sentiments and sediments of contemporary care culture? After unpacking practices of capture, correction, and control, what do we make of the remains? What remains?

More meditation than argument, this contribution borrows from traditions of Black study and maroon formations to outline a pedagogy of care rooted in abolitionist politics. How might a black maroon's politics of care reorient to disorient the present trajectory of democratic development? Bringing an embodied praxis of Black liberation to spaces of care with an eye towards abolition asks that we confront the tendencies within ourselves, our cultures, and our political systems to practice care as a paternalist extension of colonial patriarchal power, and get free from the inside out, charting trajectories of progress otherwise. Beyond the limit



spaces of what we mean when we say we care, take care, be careful, lies a poetics of relationship with the unknown, an invitation to inquiry and improvisation that retreats from respectability, and reckons with the punitive element at work within contemporary cultures of care – from the prison to policing, and even within the places we, in the academy, call home, our campuses and classrooms.

In a 1981 interview with Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich asks about a course Lorde taught in 1969, in the wake of Martin Luther King's murder. 'You taught a course on racism for white students at Lehmann?' Rich asked. Lorde described the context, the stakes were high. 'Lehmann used to be 99 percent white, and it was these students coming out of the education department who were going to teach black children in city schools.' She would playact with them and, 'all the fear and loathing of these young white college students would come pouring out; it had never been addressed ... they felt like unwilling sacrifices' (Lorde, 1981, p. 726).

In what follows I ground my discussion of care in both a pedagogy of not knowing and a process of reflection that grows out from the limit spaces of our habituated culture of care, releasing what's not serving us to make room for the kinds of care that tend to cultivate joy, choice, and a kind of resilience that can only be forged from feeding a daily practice of becoming more human than the modern era currently affords:

...Love is a word another kind of open—  
As a diamond comes into a knot of flame  
I am black because I come from the earth's inside  
Take my word for jewel in your open light.

Audre Lorde

Drawing from the academic and poverty scholarship of maroon abolition feminisms past and present, we might think about present-day prison abolition movements as the new enlightenment, with fire this time. The unfinished work of nineteenth century maroons and fugitive abolitionists, the ongoing, reparative work of waking the dead, walking with ancestors, fighting to feel more than hunted, more than humiliated, dispossessed, and abject, becoming more than possessive individualism could ever hope to contain, prophetic praxes of Black, brown, and indigenous liberation are carried from generation to generation, burning hot enough in the flesh of earth to turn coal to jewels that quake and crack the foundation from below, to invoke the poetics of Lorde cited above. For Lorde, like many of us who strive to teach liberation as a theory and a practice, classrooms become something more than spaces of intellectual consumption or mere contemplation. They become more spaces of protest and popular education, extensions of the maroon formations, congregations, the public or secreted assembly of those, 'teetering on the edge of invisibility, dis-ease and insanity'; the classroom is an alchemic catalyst for change, for us to build the kinds of futures so-called free people cannot yet know to yearn for, much less imagine (Smith, 2016, p. 73).



When contradictions are revealed, something new can enter the frame. Sometimes teaching feels like this, like exorcism. Helping students notice how we learn, not just with our minds but with our whole bodies, absorbing lessons we may or may not have chosen for ourselves, then creating the conditions that can support them in shedding what no longer serves the kinds of learning they notice they are missing. Lorde called this pedagogy, ‘confrontation teaching.’ She not only taught future teachers, she taught police officers wearing guns at John Jay the following year: ‘we had cops and kids off the block in the same class ... I did that course in the same way I did all the others, which was learning as I went along, asking the hard questions, not knowing what was coming next’ (Lorde, 1981, pp. 726–727).

Teaching students to notice and unlearn carceral, capitalist, and colonial logics of care from a place of not knowing can only ‘work’ when one teaches from their feet up, in a practice of literally physically feeling one’s feet on the ground. It means connecting the lived knowledges of oppression already in the room, building intimate relationship with the figurative root systems of race, place, gender and belonging that link the people in the room to the geographies of the plantation and to architectures of prisonscapes. As Lorde describes, the aim is less about offering up ‘chunks of information,’ but rather, ‘the learning process [as] something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot’ (p. 727).

We who believe we can render prisons obsolete move by the authority of not knowing, by feeling our feet on the earth and ‘improvising on reality.’ From Emmitt Till to Rodney King we know that the social forces that link our personal safety to protocols of public safety are not the same everywhere for everyone. When we study the continuities and discontinuities of our collective proximities to safety and power, the police cannot be seen as a central site of safety. Conventional safety seems to serve and protect wealth, whiteness, punitive surveillance, and property to the exclusion of people living on the margins of political power. To decenter the police not only requires seeing the ways it reproduces and relies upon anti-Black violence, it also requires turning inward, shining light enough on our own deep seeded tendencies to watch for flaws in each other, only to turn our weaponry on ourselves. The kind of care that centers the lives of those most directly impacted by present-day protocols of public security, patrol, and punishment, means we, as a political community, must first confront the fact that we don’t know how to promote a public safety protocol that won’t reproduce violence. This is the first step towards transformation.

Beginning from a place of not knowing, as Kaba’ teaches, allows us to be more fully present to the process of uncertainty choosing healing asks of us, feeling space to build relationship with the less familiar spaces, encounters, and confrontations that expose us to our epistemic edges. When we get curious about them and learn them from the inside out, not knowing becomes richly layered, nuanced, full of useful information. ‘[W]e have to be right here right now... The fear, the anger, the



vengeance feelings, the back and forth sliding against one day you want them dead, the next day you're okay. We just have to be here holding this right now. So that's what I mean ... it's not a healing space. Because healed is not a destination. You're just always in process' (2021, p. 145). In teaching Kaba's text to both students and peers, I found this insight one of the most challenging for folks to engage, likely due to how we have been conditioned to know justice, not as a process, but as a place, as a measurable and determinate duration of time.

However, prisons and policing cannot repair the past we have inherited. We must learn to confront these overlapping histories of poverty, racial, gender, and indigenous violence, dispossession, and decreased life chances as they land in our bodies, on the land, on our tongues, in the desires of the people we call home. But the invitation from those committed to abolitionist futures, is not to meet moments of confrontation with the same protocols of so-called 'care' that bore them here through centuries of so-called 'enlightened progress' to live among us. Instead of confronting to conquer, to extinguish, or control, what if we animated an abolitionist practice of confrontation as a politics of care that emerges otherwise, more from the breath than the discourse? What if repair were to ground our culture of care? Reflecting on care in times of physical isolation and social distance, Ashon Crawley asks us to consider 'the need for tenderness, its cultivation and care, sharply in this moment of distance' (Crawley, 2020). Crawley's read of care moves with both radical traditions of abolitionist theory and the lived experience of those who, as Lorde teaches in her poem, were 'never meant to survive' (Lorde, 1978). He draws his emphasis on tenderness and tending from a poetics of possibility that is emergent, which blooms upon our return, time and again, from 'the stillness that vibrates out' of reflection. To love Black people requires we all learn from the endless expanse that comprises ongoing struggles for Black life, all Black lives. Lives lived and lost, told and taught, smudged and conjured, Black life is the ground of abolitionist futures, and self-care means transforming our own. That means the demand of the moment is one of divestment from conventional notions of care. As Mary Hooks of *Southerners On New Ground*, puts it: "Divest! Divest! Divest from prisons, jails, courts. The vision of justice for us does not include cages. The vision of justice for us allows us to walk in our communities with safety and dignity for all Black people: those that are differently abled, Black women, Black children, queer bodies, trans women. All of our brilliance deserves that. That is public safety. So, whoever is defining it come talk to us, because we have a different vision. Get behind it or get beside us and the organizations, and the communities, and the people we represent..." (SONG, 2016).

Divesting from conventional cultures of care requires confronting ourselves in order to transform what justice means from the inside out, and we are only just beginning. In this way, abolition is more than a big idea: it is a radical act of intimate, willful vulnerability. It is a tradition of feeling free that was born at the same historical moment as liberal democracy, capitalism, and settler colonialism,





but became illegible under their reign. Anti-slavery Abolition, as Manisha Sinha writes, ‘was a radical, democratic movement that questioned the enslavement of labor ... ‘[M]odern racial slavery fostered the growth of early capitalism ... the movement to abolish it is, at the very least, its obverse’ (Sinha, 2016, p. 3). Abolition is about daring to feel more than flesh. It allowed people to express more than consent, to labor for more than mere survival, to embody more than the will of another, to have a felt sense of each other’s collective presence that could not be contained, commodified, or consumed. All of these things had been deemed criminal. While bodies, like borders, were rigorously patrolled and policed. Transgressions punished. Bonds battered. Working together to learn to lose the chains and press back against the physical and epistemic constraints of confinement, care in such conditions could be costly, increasing the risks of reaching out to one another. Yet, this is how abolition is won, not with ‘unwilling sacrifice,’ but with the will to move as one. The urgency of abolition flows like this: out of feeling more than flesh. It bubbles up to disrupt the tides of so-called ‘progress’ that shape and limit conventional orientations to safety. This includes the ways we are taught to feel at home on stolen land, the ways we feel we belong here. It muddies the solid ground of self-preservation and demands we protect ourselves by reaching out for each other, for roots, for rafts, for all of us or none.

‘Abolition,’ as Julia Chinyere Oparah reminds us, ‘is therefore not only about ending the violence of imprisonment, but also about claiming public resources and declaring the value of human life over corporate profit’ (Sudbury, 2008, p. 11). Oparah teaches us that when people free themselves from the prison of being no more than flesh, no more than property, they transform the ways they relate to themselves, their labor, each other, and the land. Care in this context is necessarily about interconnection and interdependence. Oparah draws lessons from those fugitives who created freedom, not by way of political recognition, or respectability, but through the co-created self-determination of maroon communities. Her thinking moves with them to consider the challenges of building activist abolitionist communities of care today. ‘[Ma]roon communities existed outside of the violent social control of the slave state, they were both under threat by and at war with re-enslaving forces. As maroon abolitionists, black gender-oppressed activists know that the consequences of failing to achieve abolition are that they themselves, their family members, and their loved ones will continue to be disappeared’ (p. 11).

And indeed, since the rise of the M4BL, a number of activists have inexplicably died and disappeared. Oluwatoyin Salau, a housing insecure nineteen-year-old organizer and activist in Florida was found dead in June 2020 in the pandemic shrouded heat of what would be called the summer of reckoning with racism and anti-Black violence. Her friend, Danaya Hemphill was reported as sharing, ‘Toyin, she was like a light in a dark room. That was Toyin’ (Feldman, 2020).



I am led by Lorde, Kaba, and others to confront what abolition teaches us about feeling ourselves beyond the conceits and comforts of capital. To reiterate the question with which we began, how might a black maroon's politic of care reorient to disorient the present trajectory of democratic development? What freedoms might we find when we reprogram, deprogram and get down, in the words of Janelle Monae's *Q.U.E.E.N.*, with the willful vulnerability of radical traditions of Black care: when we rise to create abolitionist horizons of public safety *en masse*?

At the core of what we might call Black abolitionist apertures past and present, is the conscious choice for once commodified communities to confront the constraints of naming and confinement that bind them, by first feeling the alchemic power of their collective presence. Then, by extending care to the collective over and against the personal risk of being reduced to flesh, they tend to the flourishing of a new concept of the political, a culture of caring otherwise.

At the level of the body, especially in positions of professional academic achievement, I feel how dissociated we are from feeling connected, from feeling ourselves and feeling each other. Privileging fear and competition over fellowship or unity is an act of self-betrayal, one in which we default to practices of abstraction and isolation over the truth that we are all embodied, and therefore, 'managing' feelings of harm, internalizing and rationalizing experiences of violence, bypassing opportunities to hold each other accountable, too closed off to lean into generative confrontation or conflict as a collective. To move closer towards a feeling-sense of abolition's transformative effects, we have to meet this moment from the feet up, grounded by the willful and receptive vulnerability of Lorde's 'not knowing what was coming next,' to show up in professional, intimate, and congregational spaces with an eye towards the possibility of cultivating refuge and repair (Lorde, 1981, p. 726). These are places where we and our students can learn how to confrontation teach together, in real time, allowing space for the unknown – in our syllabi, in our lesson plans, and programming. This would create spaces of shared learning and unlearning that retreat from 'the university as a place of enlightenment' and drop into the paradoxical truth, danger, and allure that 'sprout,' as Alexis Pauline Gumbs teaches us, 'out of the wet places in our eyes' (Moten and Harney, 2004, p. 101; Gumbs, 2008, p. 145; Gumbs, 2017).

What teaching maroon abolition requires, first and foremost, are daily practices for leaving school to 'jazz June,' to invoke the poetics of Gwendolyn Brooks. It requires staying in relation and conversation with what we collectively don't know, most fear, and dearly desire, in our flight from the familiar. In doing so, this unknown becomes steady enough to hold on to, to congregate around, return to, to shape and be shaped by, to understand, and realize – that our posture of study takes root where we stand, more in the breath than in the discourse.

Jasmine Syedullah



## Care and the commons

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in care, one grounded in the belief that care can be retooled to address persistent forms of exclusion and domination. There are many animating forces for this reclaiming of ‘care’ as a concept, including new forms of need resulting from austerity and anti-immigration policies, ultra-right-wing forms of abandonment, and, most recently the world-changing COVID-19 pandemic and the deep racial stratification and violence it has revealed.

These kinds of care work to counter dominant liberal forms of political care, such as welfare or humanitarianism which have been imagined and enacted at the level of the nation-state, or of humanity, relying on exclusionary political frameworks. Welfare excludes non-citizens; as for humanitarianism, not all qualify as equally human. Furthermore, such forms of liberal care are driven by limited moral sentiments such as sympathy, pity, or compassion, which create hierarchies by distinguishing between deserving and undeserving individuals; indeed, they have worked in large part by saving those deemed ‘innocent’ but in so doing, they criminalize ‘perpetrators’ (Ticktin, 2011, 2017, 2020). In this sense, practices of care have (unintentionally) fed the carceral state, deciding whose lives deserve attention and whose do not.

In the contemporary, reworked versions, care is at once an affective state, a practice, and an ethico-political obligation (Tronto, 1993; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Martin, Myers, and Viseu, 2015; Stevenson, 2014). Increasingly scholars, anti-racist activists and Black and transnational feminists are reclaiming the power of care, as everyday and mundane, but with a revolutionary, transformative potential. People are returning to Audre Lorde (1988), who stated that, for those who are marginalized, care is a form of political warfare: to engage in care is to uphold the right to survive. Similarly, Saidiya Hartmann (2016) argues that the labor of care produced through the violent structures of slavery and subsequently exploited by racial capitalism is not exhausted by either of these violent formations: this care enables those who were never meant to survive to do just that, even in the most brutal of contexts.

While I have long critiqued forms of care such as humanitarianism (Ticktin, 2006, 2011), I join this interest in renewed and emerging forms of materially grounded care, insofar as they are co-constitutive of a new set of political formations – what I’m calling a decolonial, feminist commons. That is, there is a version of care at the heart of the commons, insofar as the commons are about radical resource redistribution and undoing forms of domination and enclosure to produce horizontal relationships of equality, mutuality and responsibility. Care is one of the methods used to imagine, prefigure and enact alternative ways of being together in a fundamentally non-exclusionary, non-sentimental manner. Indeed, we might say that, by enacting what Woodyly (2020) calls ‘structural care,’ which is



about healing social ills through social action based on a vision of everyone as interdependent, new political formations come into being; care helps to bring a new collective subject into being. In this contribution, I introduce the idea of the commons, and then illustrate these emergent political formations with two case studies.

The commons has come to mean many things (and is practiced by many different people, from indigenous communities to Black and Brown communities, to ecologists to anarchists), but it is often referred to as a struggle against enclosures, the privatization of spaces of freedom, exclusion, and, perhaps most importantly, private property. It can also mean the sharing of wealth and resources on the basis of collective decision-making; sometimes it is spoken of as grounded in social relations built on reciprocity, respect, mutuality, and responsibility (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Starblanket, 2017; Dardot and Laval, 2019; Federici, 2019).

Feminist scholar-activists like Silvia Federici (2019) emphasize the feminist nature of the commons in terms of the communing of reproductive activities – meaning the day-to-day activities that are producing people’s lives. Examples include the collective kitchen, urban gardens, and squats. Federici states that the commons is not just a site of reproduction and redistribution: it is also a site of struggle. It builds the grounds of resistance, refusing to separate the time of political organization from that of reproduction. Abolitionist politics arguably offers the strongest example of this, insisting on the interconnection between carework and political organizing, where, for example, mothers of those who are incarcerated model collective ways of being by taking responsibility for each other’s children, and extend their care to friends, neighbors and cell mates (Naber et al 2020). In this sense, the commons is also necessarily anti-racist and decolonial.

Black and Brown activists and scholars have reassured those who worry that the goal of equivalence in a (future) commons would erase or ignore existing differences in power; instead, young scholars like Maimuna Touray (2021) actually suggest that the commons could work as a method of reparation, while queer theorist José Estaban Muñoz (2020) argues for the ‘brown commons’ as a process of thinking and imagining otherwise in the face of shared wounding (p. 6). Touray envisions the commons as a set of connections to the land shared with indigenous communities that extend a notion of value anathema to capitalist enclosures and center responsibility, care and radical belonging. Believing that settler colonialism is a structure, not an event, Touray proposes the commons as a form of reparation beyond restitution or one-time payments, insofar as it expands a way of living in which enslaved people shared knowledge and decided collectively how to prioritize their well-being. After centuries of caring for and stewarding the land, commoning involves being claimed *by* the land, recognizing human interdependence with other life forms and with the earth. It ‘places the human in common with other-than-human-beings’ (Touray, 2021).



In this context, care is about a set of relational arrangements, not moral dispositions; it is grounded in the material. It is also necessarily non-innocent. That is, it moves away from liberal goals of purity and deservingness. To care requires admitting to and managing forms of violence, not trying to evict, expunge or expel it. Caring and killing can be intertwined: for example, people kill viruses; they eat plants and animals; and they burn forests to maintain them. As Métis-scholar-activist Michelle Murphy (2015) suggests, one of the definitions of care that is often overlooked is that of being troubled, worried, uneasy, unsettled. In this sense, to care in unsettling ways, and to be unsettled by care, means to work without a clear, normative vision, requiring instead to be attuned to relationships and to place, constantly improvising. Care is not necessarily clean; to care is to be creative, to be willing to imagine otherwise, to deal with messiness and contamination. Indeed, ‘unsettling’ means that it has radical transformative potential.

In what follows, I briefly mention two emergent forms of structural care that build, and build on, an idea of the commons. To be clear, to exist, the commons needs, as Harris argues in this exchange, to undo the world as we know it, and its inequalities and forms of domination; but it is important to acknowledge that commoning already exists all around us, if we look carefully – it grows in the uncaptured excesses of racial capitalism, and prefigures alternative ways of being. I describe two of these extant experiments, each taking place at a different scale: the first is global – for this, I discuss ‘no borders’ movements; the second is local, and here I discuss practices of mutual aid. They each have their own affective dimensions. And each does different work with relation to the commons: the first helps to form a common collective political subject and to rework space, the second furthers material redistribution.

I begin with the political forms being imagined and enacted by undocumented immigrants – renamed ‘people-on-the-move’ by these folks themselves, to get away from legal categories built on exclusion and hierarchy, like refugee, asylum seeker and economic immigrant – and the centrality of care to many of these movements. Indeed, one of the activists engaged in sanctuary work – which I see as part of a larger network of no-borders movements – stated that she thought of the project of sanctuary as the ‘embodied, collective action of care,’ where care is about spurring the imagination, and ‘training for the not-yet.’

Occupations are a key aspect of this embryonic politics of and by people-on-the-move: occupations of abandoned buildings and land. People are not just fighting for the freedom to move but the ‘freedom to inhabit’ (Paik et al., 2019, p.10). In particular, I have been drawn by people-on-the-move attempting to create space to live, in ways not condoned by forms of liberal capitalist governance.

I am aware of how troubling the term ‘occupation’ is, particularly in relation to settler colonialism. The question is if such acts can be repurposed toward freedom; that is, if no-borders movements can practice decolonial politics, working with indigenous communities against the nation-state to undo rather than further the



settler colonial project (Fortier, 2017). The point is not to imagine or claim the land as empty or available, but precisely to refuse the authority of the state, challenging its right to decide who resides where. But even when evoked against the settler colonial project, the concept of occupation recalls violent histories. In this sense, commoning is necessarily a non-innocent practice – we all inherit and live in the wake of these histories, we are all shaped by violence, even if we are differently situated in relation to it. To claim innocence is a liberal aspiration; it is not a goal of the commons, where exclusion based on moral stratification is not an option.

People-on-the-move are re-imagining both space and how to be together, asserting their presence against experiences of dispossession and inequality, and doing so beyond judgments of deserving or undeserving, rescue and protection: beyond innocence or guilt. They are building alternative forms of governance against the state and against what they see as unjust treatment, including the lack of basic care and shelter. They do this by occupying liminal spaces, challenging regimes of private property. Togetherness is grounded on sharing resources, in ways that require reciprocity and mutuality, but not necessarily love – this is a form of care or concern that does not require liking those with whom one lives. It requires inclusion and respect. Whoever needs a home – and for however long – can occupy any welcoming, un-lived in or abandoned space. These include border zones, hotels, monuments and churches. In many ways, these occupations are forcing a more equitable distribution of resources, and as part of this, they include the refusal of discourses and hierarchies of moral deservingness.

Occupations have taken different forms, from the now famous French *sans papiers* movement of the 1990s which occupied churches, to ‘the Jungle’ – the make-shift camp on the outskirts of Calais, France that lasted from January 2015 to October 2016 (Agier, 2018; King, 2019). But France is not the only place where such occupations are occurring. In the summer of 2018, as part of *the Multiple Mobilities Research Cluster*, I went to the occupied Plaza Hotel in Athens, Greece, one of about twelve occupied buildings which, under the new right-wing government, has now been shut down. Plaza is an example of the autonomous organization of people-on-the-move, without an NGO working top-down to manage them or provide services. These occupations originated in the dissident history of the district of Exarcheia, where abandoned buildings have been the site of collective living and action since the 1970s. ‘Refugees’ and locals worked and occupied the hotel together. Rather than being contained on the margins of the Greek polity, as with so many refugee camps, these people-on-the-move live in Athens, indistinguishable from the many who require shelter, particularly since Greece’s debt crisis. They were all houseless, out-of-place, and as such, they reclaimed space together.

Plaza challenged liberal models of care. For example, Plaza residents worked to enable children to go to school regardless of how long they would be in Athens, decoupling social services from nation-states – indeed, as one of the Plaza residents



explained to me, the local teachers organized and went on strike to enable this. This was an experiment in how social services can be accessible to people beyond citizenship status or the state, beyond identity, as part of a larger commons, driven by participation, presence and mutuality.

In these circumstances, care is enacted by creating and sharing spaces to live, in a non-exclusionary manner; it manifests in other material concerns such as creating access to healthcare and education. In Plaza, there were communal kitchens, so people could prepare food and eat as a collective. Practices of care like these work to even out hierarchies, and create a world where people all have access to resources to live. This does not mean that such occupations work without violence or conflict. Rather, violence is something that people inevitably share from living under racial capitalism and imperialism. The idea is to learn to use an attuned, caring manner to resolve issues, rather than resorting to strategies like incarceration or expulsion. Starting from a situation of enforced marginalization and dispossession, people-on-the move and those in solidarity have created a series of transnational, commoning nodes – an emergent feminist decolonial commons – grounded on forms of radical care, respect and collective self-governance; in the process, they are prefiguring a new collective political subject.

My second example is an experiment in reworking material infrastructures to deepen connections between people at more local levels. This is the project of free community or ‘friendly’ fridges set up across all the boroughs of New York City. The first refrigerators were put in place in February 2020 by a group of anarchists working to combat hunger in underserved communities during the economic crisis and pandemic, but they have far exceeded that goal: they are resources that anyone can share in, anonymously, without giving reasons or showing deservingness. They trust people to take what they need and give back if they can. It creates a new set of relations grounded in material equality, not in exploitation and extractivism (Colyar, 2020; Rosa, 2020).

These fridges prefigure forms of politics grounded on the idea of care as simply about need and survival, not on a notion of ‘community’ that foregrounds only positive – and often exclusionary – affective ties. Even as they help to imagine an otherwise, these fridges build on the long and colorful histories of mutual aid, which are based on the idea of social solidarity and cooperation, and build new social relationships grounded in collaboration, participation, and equality (Spade, 2020a, b). Mutual aid is about radical collective care and it is feminist in that it works against forms of paternalism or top-down giving. Even as Indigenous communities may have the longest history of such practices, many Black feminists have claimed mutual aid as a key element of abolitionism. The care embedded in this project is about respect and reciprocity; resources are shared, regardless of who one is, what one does, and how one inhabits the world.

To be sure, just as mutual aid is not new, neither are ‘free’ projects: we need only think of the Black Panther Party’s survival programs, which included free



breakfast, or Occupy encampments where resources were shared. There are many creative feminist examples, such as the ‘Eating in Public’ project by Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma, which started with free stores and expanded to include fridges, as one part of a series of experiments in planting guerilla gardens, food trees, eating and teaching about weeds and holding ‘diggers dinners,’ all inspired by the seventeenth-century English commoners: serfs who were pushed off communal land at the outset of the private-property revolution, who engaged in activist planting to take back their commons and to eat (Ganaden, 2014). They distinguish their experiments from charity insofar as the free store and fridge are for everyone: rich and poor alike.

The affective ties cultivated by these forms of commoning are less about individuality than the collective, more about equality than hierarchy. Togetherness is about co-existing in ways that ensure everyone’s survival. ‘Care’ in these times looks like respect for everyone’s fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration. It looks like humility in the face of the unknown and uncontrollable, and openness to new imaginative possibilities. It also looks like a demand for collective responsibility, and what M4BL among others have prefigured as an ‘irresistible impulse to justice’ (McLeod, 2019, p. 267).

Miriam Ticktin

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