

ENOUGH: THE ANTHOLOGY

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The creation of this anthology was a collective project—in addition to our incredible essay contributors, a team of collaborators helped us edit, sort, timeline, review essays, create our website, and stay in touch with authors. We're so grateful to **Ana Hernandez-Zamudio** for fixing up our website, and to **Jessica Rosenberg, Maddie Pfeiffer,** and **Derekh,** each of whom brought deep editing and organizing care and attention that helped us get this project over the finish line after over a decade of working on it.

WHAT IS ENOUGH? written in 2008 for the website launch

What is the difference between financial security and hoarding wealth?

What are some ways we can share resources to support community and movement-building?

How can we talk to each other about personal money issues and politics without guilt, shame, and judgment?

What does a politics of wealth redistribution look like in the day-to-day, and what are the obstacles to developing conversations about this in political communities we belong to?

These are some questions we've been thinking about, and we're interested in jumpstarting conversations about how we conceive of and live a politics of wealth redistribution. This anthology is from the website we created as a space to discuss these issues.

The ubiquity of capitalism in the U.S. can limit our ability, even in radical communities, to conceptualize creative responses to oppression and injustice. This can manifest both in how we build movements (reproducing bureaucratic, hierarchical, business-type models; packaging and “selling” social justice work to foundations in exchange for grants), and in how we deal with personal finances in our own lives (defaulting to patterns like hoarding, excessive consumerism, and individualism in how we conceptualize our lives and futures and economic security).

We'd like to address some of the ways that class privilege and capitalist dynamics function even within communities and within the lives of individuals working to fight oppression and economic injustice. It can feel taboo to share details about things like income, inheritance, class background, debt, and spending. Silence and secrecy about money make it difficult for us to challenge ourselves and each other when classist

dynamics arise. Social conditioning trains us to hoard money rather than share it and build community. We want to get people talking about building shared values and practices around wealth redistribution, because we think figuring out how much is enough, and when to give away money, are key under-discussed questions in anti-capitalist politics.

The two of us starting this website come from very different class backgrounds, and we're hoping for a specifically cross-class conversation about these issues. We think that the anxiety that can arise when talking about these things among folks with different experiences of class can be useful and productive, and we hope to create a space where we can learn by sharing our experiences and challenging each other.

Who We Are:

Dean Spade is a trans lawyer who grew up in rural Virginia with a single mom on and off welfare, and then later with foster parents. Dean has been working to build queer and trans liberation based in racial and economic justice for the past two decades. He's the author of Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law, the director of the documentary "Pinkwashing Exposed: Seattle Fights Back!," and the creator of the mutual aid toolkit at BigDoorBrigade.com. His latest book, Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next), was published by Verso Press in October 2020.

Roan Boucher is an organizer, facilitator, writer, artist, and parent. He grew up in a family with first-generation wealth and spent a lot of his 20s figuring out how to give away his \$400k trust fund ethically and transparently, and organizing other young people with wealth to do the same. He cofounded AORTA (the Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance), and spent 15 years as a worker-owner there. His politics have been deeply shaped by racial and economic justice organizing led by poor people; by worker ownership and solidarity economy movements; and by queer and trans organizing rooted in collective liberation.

INTRODUCTION to the 2026 Anthology - Roan Boucher and Dean Spade, 2026

Our resistance movements have big visions. We're working to dismantle capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism; to build a new world without prisons, borders, bosses, or landlords. Our ideas and commitments are profound, and figuring out how to manifest them in our daily living conditions and survival strategies is deeply challenging. How do we develop the new world we want to live in from inside the conditions we already live under? How do we confront the ways that conditions of capitalism, neoliberalism, and white supremacy contain and influence resistance strategies? How do we live according to our principles when our basic needs are still produced by systems that hurt people, animals, and the planet? This collection of essays explores anti-capitalist experiments and reflections on these questions; they are a set of stories from people who are challenging these dynamics, in families, households, communities, organizations, and movements. These essays are generous offerings of people who are trying to find ways to live according to liberatory principles in a world shaped by severe injustice.

When we started the *Enough* website in 2008, we had both been talking and writing about these topics for years with other organizers in our communities. *Enough* began as an online zine/blog, with writing from the two of us along with many others; a response to a yearning in our communities for discussion about radical approaches to day-to-day decisions about money and resource sharing. We hoped it would spark conversations between people in our communities about how we all deal with money and generate collaborative experiments. The response to the initial project was so strong that we decided to create an essay anthology, where people could share their stories about things they had tried. We put out the initial call for essays in 2012 and got many wonderful submissions. We engaged the authors in editorial processes and worked to shop the book to different radical publishers. Then life intervened in several ways, and the project got delayed. A couple times we dug back in again, only to have another health issue, new baby, major project, community crisis, or something else hold us back.

Now it has been over a decade of holding on to these fascinating essays—along with a few more we collected along the way—and we are finally publishing them as a collection here. Some are just as fresh as the day they were written. Others needed notes updating on what happened next from the authors to bring them up to date. We hope they generate lively debates and new collaborations.

When we started this project over a decade and a half ago, we could not have known how much more relevant it would be in 2025 than it was back then. The global and US wealth gaps have widened horrifically since that time. The pressures of ecological crisis

and pandemic have popularized the idea of mutual aid, and more people are relying on scrappy community projects for their basic necessities than ever. Rents and food prices are higher than ever, more people in our communities are unhoused, and ecological and economic collapse loom on the horizon. More than ever, we need to figure out how to share with each other, collectivize basic necessities, make decisions together, and destroy the apparatuses of extraction that control our lives. May the stories of many people's humble and creative efforts contained in this project support that work for survival.

How did we get here?

By design, capitalism allows a very small percentage of people to accumulate massive wealth because of other people's stolen, unpaid, and underpaid labor. Colonialism and imperialism produce widespread dispossession, enriching a few and creating ongoing vulnerability and violence for many. In the context of neoliberalism, new techniques for extracting and consolidating wealth have emerged, producing even greater wealth inequality in the last four decades. In the United States, the gap between rich people and poor people is getting larger and larger, social welfare programs have been dismantled, and essential infrastructure, resources, and services from public transit to education to firefighting are increasingly becoming privatized. Police and military budgets increase annually, whether Democrats or Republicans are in office, while more and more people go without basic necessities. Under the second Trump administration, these conditions have only sharpened with increasing criminalization of poverty, brutal immigration enforcement, escalating war, and the opening of new prisons across the country.

Capitalism encourages us to respond to scarcity as individuals, striving harder and harder, rather than attacking the system through collective action. We are taught that it is shameful to accept support. We learn the myth of meritocracy—that if we work hard enough, it is possible for us not only to be secure, but to join the wealthy.^[1] A 2022 study found that 44 percent of US adults believe they have the available tools to become billionaires. A 2023 study found that 69 percent of Gen Z-ers and 54 percent of millennials who don't currently consider themselves wealthy believe they will become wealthy someday. We are taught that poverty represents personal failure. People born with wealth often cloak their position in secrecy, feeling shame about their unearned means. The resulting cultural taboos about money help keep people separated and impair collective action.

The social norms that sustain capitalism can limit our ability, even in radical communities, to conceptualize creative responses to oppression and injustice. This can manifest both in how we build movements (reproducing bureaucratic, hierarchical, business-type models; packaging and “selling” social justice work to foundations in exchange for grants; conceptualizing an individualist model of “social justice

entrepreneurship”), and in how we deal with personal finances in our own lives (defaulting to patterns like hoarding, consumerism, and individualism in how we conceptualize our lives, futures, and economic security).

Class privilege and capitalist dynamics function even within communities and the lives of individuals working to fight oppression and economic injustice. People hide details about their income, inheritance, class background, debt, and spending. Silence and secrecy about money make it difficult for us to challenge each other and ourselves when classist dynamics arise. Social conditioning trains us to hoard money rather than share it and build community.

As anti-capitalists, we also face dilemmas that come from living within a system—relying on it for survival needs—that we seek to dismantle. We imagine alternatives to capitalist healthcare, banking, childcare and housing systems, and so much more, yet for the most part our movements do not yet provide alternatives to participating in existing systems. We live inside these contradictions, often experiencing shame and frustration at our ongoing relationships with violent markets and institutions to meet our individual needs. Many people hope that a new way of living will be provided by some future government, that we can elect people who will create free health care, universal basic income, free transportation, a food system not based on fossil fuels, and the like. But with conditions sharpening around the globe as consumer industrial society unravels, and fascists in power in so many places, it is clear that we cannot wait for anyone else to solve our problems, we need to create local, collaborative, horizontal ways to meet our needs as quickly as possible. Our experiments, even though they are often partial and imperfect, are essential inspiration for these times.

When we created *Enough*, we were responding to several concerns: the critique of the nonprofit industrial complex (enlivened by INCITE!’s 2004 conference and 2007 anthology, [The Revolution Will Not Be Funded](#)); frustration with philanthropic control of movements and persistent scarcity and competition between movement groups scrambling for philanthropic resources; recognition that capitalist dynamics are internalized within and limit resistance movements; lack of openness and transparency about money in our communities; and strong social pressure to accumulate and manage resources individually rather than collectively, resulting in most people feeling and acting far outside their values in how they actually managed money and basic needs. The essays on *Enough* have explored these concerns through discussions of radical poor people’s organizing, spiritual practice, challenges to traditional philanthropy, relationships with birth and chosen family, professionalism and academia, debt, property ownership, giving away money, and more.

This body of work recognizes that individual choices about giving away money or avoiding certain consumer practices are not sufficient nor the central strategy for ending capitalism, but that as we analyze and oppose broad scale arrangements of

maldistribution we must also examine their impacts on our daily decisions, communities, and relationships. Building alternative structures includes small-scale immediate alternatives for resource sharing, managing feelings of scarcity, and renegotiating ways of being. We are inspired by the creativity of small-scale alternatives being experimented with and developed by activists to meet their daily needs in the context of work to dismantle capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism. We believe that sharing these stories with each other, including our failures and false starts, can help proliferate such experiments. In times like these, it is essential not to dismiss interventions for being small. Small-scale efforts that can be inspirations for others to experiment with, change, adapt and build upon are what produce transformative bottom-up change. Capitalism and the state enforce large-scale ways of living from above, colonialism, war, extraction, and regulation that puts our lives in the hands of elites and corporations. The most effective resistance methods and disaster relief approaches will inevitably be, and should be, local, experimental, humble, adaptive, self-organized, and self-critical.

These essays explore ways that we conceive of and are living a politics of interdependence, resource sharing, and wealth redistribution. They are by and for organizers, activists, artists, and cultural workers directly engaged in resistance movements. They are rooted in anti-capitalism, feminism, and racial justice, as well as critical disability, decolonial, and queer and trans resistance politics. As such, they create space for contributors to be (self)critical of our movements and share strategies that are based on an analysis of our current strengths and weaknesses, and can serve as a tool for discussion and debate.

We hope that sharing this collection now inspires further reflection, discussion, practices and experiments with disrupting and dismantling capitalism as we care for each other and struggle for a different world.

CRIP CURRENCY AND THE CHIRIPA COLLECTIVE: A THRIVALIST STRATEGY FOR THE SICK AND DISABLED - Aurora Levins Morales, 2012

A proposal for a 21st century hunter-gatherer economic model for the chronically ill, incorporating ideas from traditional micro-businesses and small women's cooperatives, the local currency movement, transition towns and other creative ideas.

1: Chiripa Economics

Chiripa is a Spanish word that means a stroke of luck. In the Puerto Rican countryside where I grew up, it meant those little bits of money that dribbled in from odds and ends of jobs or little businesses. In that time and place, women had little direct access to cash. The coffee, banana and citrus crops were sold by men, and men controlled the money. But many women had tiny businesses generating little income streams: a neighbor gathered daisies from our farm and sold bouquets, several made the cubes of frozen juice called “limbers” and sold them to school children for a penny, others baked cakes, hemmed dresses, sewed school uniforms, made candy or grew hot peppers to sell to their neighbors.

Chiripa economics is the modern equivalent of hunter-gatherer economies. Hunter-gatherers move through the landscape, taking advantage of whatever happens to be in season, knowing where resources are likely to be found, but drawing from many different sources, and flexible enough to take advantage of unexpected windfalls. Chiripistas are traditionally people who are economically marginalized, lack the capital to start full-sized businesses, or are mothers busy with childrearing who lack the time. Whatever their circumstances, chiripistas make use of a variety of skills to “harvest” small quantities of income from a variety of little ventures.

For people with chronic illnesses and disabilities that keep us out of the job market, the chiripa work style has many advantages. Like traditional chiripistas, we are economically marginalized and lack capital. But because of exhaustion, pain, and the immense amount of attention our self-care requires, we're also short on energy and time, and usually can't maintain full time work. An economic life that has small, separate parts can be more easily adjusted to our fluctuating capacity than a single full- or part-time job. Chiripa economics also allows us to diversify. We can have several micro-businesses that require different skills and levels of energy, activities that are seasonal and let us rev up for a short while, then rest. Jobs that can be done slowly, at our own pace, products we can make as we're able, without quotas.

2: Collectivizing the Effort

I grew up in a rural Caribbean culture which is much more communally oriented than most of U.S. culture. Privacy and individual achievement were less valued than community involvement. I also grew up in a communist home (the root is the same as communal, common, community) and so I always look for ways to make individual struggles become group projects. Sharing a struggle makes it easier on everyone. Effort and costs can be spread out, and the feeling of solidarity, of being in it together, makes a huge difference to morale.

In 2007 I had a stroke and received rehab both in the U.S. and Cuba. In the U.S., besides having access to a very limited number of sessions, patients were separated by curtains, each in our own private space. We weren't supposed to know what anyone else's disability or injury was, or what rehab they were doing. The excruciating work of desensitizing my raw nerves and regaining the use of my right side happened in private and it was exhausting and discouraging. In Cuba, everyone worked in one room. We knew all about each other's cases, because the therapists talked openly about what they were doing with each person. We could watch each other's efforts, make eye contact and encourage each other while we worked, and encourage each other when things got hard. My rehab sessions were almost 40 hours a week, but I was much less tired and was in much better spirits. Our individual recovery was still our own responsibility, but it felt like a group project. We were all going to fight to reach our goals together.

U.S. culture heavily promotes the idea of individual achievement and individual success or failure. Although we have a strong history of cooperatives, collectives, intentional communities, barn-raising and other communal strategies, that tradition has been suppressed. In hard times like the ones we're in now, we're expected to sink or swim on our own, and the societal message is that those who sink just don't have what it takes to live. Collectivizing our economic struggles helps to dispel the myth that poverty is a personal failure. Sharing the stories of our efforts to survive, and pooling our skills and resources to help each other and ourselves is a consciousness raising process that makes it clear how little our difficulties have to do with our personal qualities.

Oppressive systems always try to make the oppressed think that the reason they're oppressed is that they're defective. One of the great gifts of being a teenager in Chicago during the early second wave feminist movement was getting to be part of a big collective process of women sharing the stories of our lives, comparing notes and reframing what our experiences meant. Because I essentially grew up in feminist consciousness raising groups, I knew that what was hard in my relationships or my school life, how I was treated at work or in the healthcare system, the inequities of heterosexual sex or the dangers of gendered violence were none of them the result of character flaws, not my fault. I could see that sexism made those things hard. For sick

and disabled people, collectivizing our economic struggles can help us stay clear that the level of difficulty in our lives is not the result of personal failure: oppression makes things hard.

Chiripistas often work alone, but sometimes they gather into small cooperatives to make food, clothing, crafts, repair bicycles, grow new crops, manufacture wheelchairs, cut hair, raise hens. Cooperatives can get group loans, share tools and the costs of marketing, and members can keep each other company and build something together, ending isolation and boosting morale.

Although it varies based on individual circumstances and local levels of access, many chronically ill people and some disabled people are not physically able to gather in one place in order to work together. For sick people whose energy levels can fluctuate dramatically, managing to all have energy at the same time is close to impossible. In the past, communal survival projects have also depended on being in the same geographic area. In order to be part of an intentional community or a collective business, you usually have to move there. People in our constituency don't have that flexibility. We depend on networks of support in the places where we've settled, have extremely varied environmental needs and don't have the financial margin to allow us to easily relocate.

The climate of blame, internalized shame about our struggles, discouragement, lack of resources, inability to relocate, diverse and often contradictory physical needs, fluctuating capacity, and sheer exhaustion have all made it hard for the sick and disabled to collectivize. I've spent years trying. But modern communications technology makes it possible to create non-geographic intentional communities, cooperative businesses and networks of support like this one. Modern technology could allow us to build cooperative chiripa-based ventures, working from our own beds and desks, but sharing skills, access, money, knowledge, connections and encouragement.

3: Transition

As we face a growing global crisis of capitalism, an energy crisis with the approaching end of oil reserves and the escalating environmental crises of climate change, contamination of water, land and air, and genetic modification of the food supply, with the threat it poses to all plant reproduction, to name the most obvious challenges, many people are coming up with creative ways to prepare for dramatic change. The Transition Town movement "is a grassroots network of communities that are working to build resilience in response to peak oil, climate destruction, and economic instability. ..founded (in part) upon the principles of permaculture."

Local currencies, some of them developed in connection with Transition Towns, “aim to raise the resilience of local economies by encouraging re-localisation of buying and food production.” People can exchange labor outside the dollar economy, restoring value to abilities the marketplace may not value. The Common Good Bank extends that idea by trying to integrate “a fast-growing mutual credit system with a new type of bank account, so that community-centered decision-making, money-creation, innovation, cooperation, and economic justice can connect seamlessly to the current mainstream economy,” creating a transition banking system.

The technical expertise and inventiveness of often right-wing and highly individualistic survivalists, combined with progressive movements around food justice, community-based medicine and collective housing are giving rise to what I call a “thrivalist” movement, whose goal is not just individual and family survival, but collective thriving, in the midst of disastrous circumstances. Principles of permaculture are being applied in many creative ways. Barter, community and backyard gardens and other cashless ways of meeting our needs are all making a comeback.

The sick and disabled are especially vulnerable in times of economic crisis. The resources we depend on become unreliable, social programs and public services are cut, infrastructure begins to break down, opportunities for work become more scarce, the health care system less accessible and more costly. Power shortages make everyone’s lives harder, but for us, they can be catastrophic, even life-threatening. They can deprive us of necessary medical equipment, leave us housebound and isolated, and make it difficult for us to maintain safe environments. Sick and disabled people need to be part of designing the transition strategies for our communities. We can also begin designing our own shared strategies.

One possibility is to create our own communal currency, based not on geographically local community, but on a shared set of challenges. Local currencies are a way to keep resources within a community. Instead of being backed by gold reserves or other capital, they’re backed by the creativity, skills and energy of a community of people. Crip currency could help to build resources among the sick and disabled by allowing us to put resources back into supporting each other. We can create value according to our own standards, exchanging skills that the crashing marketplaces don’t value but that we do.

Many of the local control strategies being developed in geographic communities could also work in a virtual community of chronically ill and disabled people. Paul Glover, the founder of the highly successful Ithaca Hours currency, has written a book about creating health cooperatives and “self-insuring” as a community. Ithaca has one of the few medically integrated free clinics in the country, specifically for the uninsured. I went to graduate school at a “university without walls,” a geographically dispersed graduate school that allowed students to learn at home, and had faculty spread out

across the country. What if we created a virtual, geographically dispersed free clinic without walls for uninsured and underinsured chronically ill and disabled people?

With our chiripa collectives, crip currency and free clinic without walls, we could also encourage the development of thivalist technology and projects especially beneficial to our community. We could become our own spread out transition town.

4: Practice

What does this mean in practice, right now? I can see multiple possible starting points, based on the passions and needs of the people I'm personally connected to. First of all, we can share our stories, look at what our common and unique struggles are and see what we can learn from each other about survival strategies. Interested people could form teams to:

1. Look into business structures for a chiripa cooperative for sick and disabled people, where we engage in individual micro-businesses, but are part of a legal entity that can seek financing, share the costs of professional services and marketing, share a website (sort of like Etsy for artsy entrepreneurs) and pool our skills.
2. Research the possibility of adapting the local currency model to our geographically dispersed community. Read Paul Glover's book on creating local currencies. Share the cost of a consult with an expert. Find out more about the Common Good Bank.
3. Research the possibility of a free clinic without walls. Read Glover's book [[Health Democracy](#)] about that, and consult with experts.
4. Create a skills bank database for sick and disabled people, which could be used for barter and could be the basis for a later currency project.
5. Create a needs bank database of the kinds of goods and services we need access to, including those that don't yet exist.
6. Start a list of specific concerns for our people as we face economic and environmental crisis.

People interested in exploring these ideas with me can reach me through my website at www.auroralevinsmorales.com.

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TAX RESISTANCE - adrienne maree brown, 2019

In 2018, the IRS caught up with me.

Again.

I was traveling, with a group of Black people down south that I was facilitating. I went to check my bank account to see if I had enough money to rent a car, and it was empty.

It shouldn't have been empty.

It should've been quite full.

But it was empty. And I immediately knew what had happened. It happened before, three years before, while grocery shopping. That time, I called my bank and they told me that the IRS had put a hold on my finances. They told me that there was nothing they could do, even though I've been banking with them since I was 13. They told me that the government would have to lift that hold for me to access any of my funds again.

That time, I was able to call someone and get the hold lifted that day with the promise of future payments. I got myself into right standing with the IRS, and entered into a payment plan.

But then Trump was elected. And when it was time to file my 2016 taxes, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Now here I was, on the road, without any funds, and with no one answering my calls.

When I finally got through to someone at the IRS, they said that my situation was dire, and that I wasn't going to be able to fix it on the phone call. I panicked: how was I going to survive?

I had a few smart moments. One was my past self helping me: after the first time the IRS froze me, I had set aside a few months' rent with my parents. I figured a few months would be enough time to resolve whatever issue came up. Two, I asked some of my very smart friends to help me. One of them found a tax relief service, basically an operation that says, "we recognize that you are overwhelmed by adulting, so we will talk to the IRS for you for a massive fee." I called them at 7 AM the next morning from an airport. The guy who I spoke to on the phone was smooth as silk, and he made it sound like they would rescue me, valiantly, slaying any IRS officers who tried to fux with my

life. He sold me, and I signed up to hand over the responsibility of interacting with the IRS to strangers.

Of course it didn't go that smoothly, they weren't able to negotiate the amount down in any way, and it took many more months than I had set aside rent for.

The IRS was coming for me, not just because I hadn't paid my taxes for one year in protest of this ignorant president. I'd actually not paid my taxes for 13 years prior to that. I was a war tax resister, which meant that as long as our country was involved in what I deemed to be unjust wars, and as long as the tax system was structured so that the majority of payment we make goes to fund military operations (as opposed to some form of participatory budgeting), that I would not pay into that system. I still feel like it's one of the most radical and beautiful choices I've ever made. The years in which I could claim that I was not financially supporting the violence that my country was enacting on the world, those were the best years of sleep I've had in my life.

But it made the IRS furious. And when the IRS is furious, it's dangerous. Now I was in a particularly dangerous situation. The IRS was angry and vengeful with me, and they wanted to punish me. This meant that every step forward I took, I was facing their bureaucratic and irrational frustration. There was never an easy way to make a payment, to be able to say to them "look, you've taken all my money, doesn't that equal payment?"

They wanted me to somehow make exorbitant payments, even though they had emptied all of my bank accounts, garnished my wages, and put a levy on future earnings. It was a conundrum, and I couldn't find a way out. It took months, months where I didn't have any money and I had to teach myself, remind myself, how to survive without an income. I had to remember how to hustle, I had to ask my clients to cover all of my expenses upfront, rather than waiting for me to spend all the money and then get reimbursed.

And, most of all, I had to turn to my community. I had to ask people if they could put actual money into my bank account, and I had to ask people to cover some of my expenses. I was mortified, and then I was vulnerable, and then I was transparent, and then I was in deeper community than I've ever been in.

What I found at the intersection of all this transparency and generosity was enough. I wasn't shopping, I wasn't spending in the ways that I was used to. I didn't have access to all the bougie things that I was accustomed to.

Instead what I had was nourishment, shelter, care, and love. All around me, in abundance. What I had was offers from so many people that I could come to them, stay

with them, live with them, eat their food. I got to see in a visceral way just who had my back, who held my life with me. It was so humbling.

And I also learned that I've been generous in my life. People had noticed the things that I had given them, both the material resources, and the other kinds of offers of support, generosity, love, having people's back. Things that I had done organically, not as part of any transaction. I had planted seeds with my love and care that were now bearing fruit right when I was hungry.

And I'm so grateful, grateful to each of the people who stepped up, who showed me that they were down to support me through my mistakes, ego and learning. I'm still convinced that more tax resistance is a powerful strategy, but what I've learned is that there is no strategy that works as a solo strategy. I was just thinking of myself, just thinking of *my* own radical politics, and making political choices from that place. But that's not what I believe in.

What I believe is that collective strategies are the ones that actually advance us as a species. What I believe is that interdependence is the way we stand in our dignity in the face of a government system that wishes to make us all conform to the most violent and base level of our humanity.

What I believe is that we will find a way to re-distribute the funds, our collective funds, through strategies that actually serve the majority of humanity, instead of a small few who wish to use all resources for territorial imperialistic aims.

So, now I make my monthly payment to the IRS. Now I set aside funds for future mess, just in case I ever forget my place in this current hell economy again.

Now, I'm very transparent with a large number of people about my financial situation, the risks I can take, and how important it is for me to maintain my living wage, my financial solvency. Now, I am in conversations with people I love about how we build the next economy together, an economy that aligns with our values, through strategies that align with interdependence, generating pathways to enough.

adrienne maree brown grows healing ideas in public through her multi-genre writing, her music and her podcasts. Informed by 25 years of movement facilitation, somatics, Octavia E Butler scholarship and her work as a doula, adrienne has nurtured Emergent Strategy, Pleasure Activism, Radical Imagination and Transformative Justice as ideas and practices for transformation. She is the author/editor of several published texts, cogenerated of a tarot deck and a developing musical ritual.

BUILDING THE FUTURES WE ARE DREAMING: CHALLENGING CAPITALISM THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE AND INTERDEPENDENCE - Mia Mingus, 2015

*“Look closely at the present you are constructing:
it should look like the future you are dreaming.”*

-Alice Walker

Interdependence

When I think about the meeting place of TJ and resisting capitalism, I most often think of our work to build interdependent relationships and communities that can respond to all types of violence, including the violence of capitalism. I think of the need to push back against a culture of independence and the myth of independence that tells us that we can and should be able to do everything on our own—that we shouldn’t ask for help—and the way this thinking foils so many of our best attempts at liberatory work.

The work I am most interested in to resist capitalism is not only the vital work of redistributing money and resources or the structural and institutional political changes we need to make, but the changes we need within our intimate networks and communities as well. The kind of relationships, interdependence, and commitment we will need to build with each other that will allow us to sustain our work to resist, divest from, and ultimately build compelling and viable alternatives to capitalism.

The intentional damage that capitalism has done to our relationships, trust, commitments and love are profound and I often wonder how we will be able to build back all capitalism has taken from us. What will we need to begin to slow its generational effects?

For most of us who have experienced violence within our communities, it is not only that we cannot turn to the state, but it is also that most of us do not have people in our lives to whom we can turn to for support, let alone a TJ process. This is particularly true in instances of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, child abuse and child sexual abuse; as well as for survivors, as well as bystanders and those who have harmed who want to take accountability.

Capitalism relies on the breaking of relationships and isolation. It thrives every time we turn away from each other and even ourselves. It insidiously breeds distrust, competition, domination, fear and shame for the sake of profit and greed. Capitalism

conspires with abled supremacy to mercilessly shame and guilt us for need, rest and care. Our bodies' worth becomes measured by our productivity. Our time gets monopolized by the exhausting and dehumanizing work of survival rather than care for and connection to ourselves, our loved ones and the planet. We internalize the myth of independence. Therefore, when violence happens, we often do not have the capacity, time or social ties necessary to be able to respond well, if at all.

Because the truth is, our communities are not perfect either and there is much transformation needed to be done inside of our communities as well. For many of us, attempts at transformative justice and community accountability painfully reveal just how much work we need to do on the "community" part of "community-based responses to violence." TJ continues to expose how few of us feel connected to a "community" and how, though we continually throw the word around, many of us don't know what "community" means, even as we desperately long for it. Those of us working to respond to domestic and sexual violence within our communities realize quickly that much of our work must include building relationships that have the capacity to support TJ responses.

Part of building interdependence is about cultivating a kind of commitment that is extremely rare. I have found it looks like knowing that we will make mistakes and mess up, and that our challenges and spectacular failures will far outweigh our victories and successes. Our commitment must be to keep learning, changing and trying, because if we are to ever find a way out of the cycles of intimate and state violence, trauma, and exploitation that surround us, we must become well-practiced in growth, repair and courage. It is a commitment to each other that we cannot do this work alone and that we need each other. *We need each other.* It is rejecting the individualism of capitalism that tells us that we are better off alone, not to trust, and that our "safety" means someone else's exploitation and oppression. It is building connection as a challenge to isolation and countering disposability through creating the conditions that could support healing, redemption, making amends, and accountability. It is moving away from binaries such as good vs. bad or guilty vs. innocent by acknowledging our complexities, contradictions, and collective responsibility for violence. It is doing the work to take care of ourselves so that we can take care of each other, and vice versa. It is being able to have and express our individual and collective boundaries, and doing the work to even know what our boundaries are. It has looked like collective leadership and vulnerability, humility and gratitude.

I believe, at the heart of our work for liberation is the place where responsibility and choice meet. It brings to mind the kind of commitment that keeps children fed despite exhausted parents, the selfless things we do for the people we love or the centuries-old, unyielding, determined tide of justice. The sacred power of purposeful and choice-full obligation and willing responsibility that are not forced, but instead desired, honored, and valued. *This* is the kind of interdependence that I am always looking for

and that I never want us to lose ever again. *This* is the kind of interdependence that I believe is liberation in practice.

Transformative Justice

Transformative Justice is a generative methodology for addressing harm and violence in ways that support survivors' healing, harmers' accountability, and community well-being, without relying on existing punishment systems. TJ seeks to address incidences of harm and violence in ways that meet immediate needs, while transforming the conditions which allow for harm and violence to occur.

We understand state systems such as prisons, police, the criminal legal system, border patrol, and the foster care system to be entities of extraordinary violence, cruelty and punishment. Because of this, TJ responses do not rely on the state. We know that state systems do not hold the monopoly on punishment and violence and that many, many survivors have experienced incredible trauma within their community and intimate relationships in the form of victim blaming, minimization and denial, shaming, exile and ostracization, threats, verbal and emotional abuse, or full-blown violence. TJ compels us to do the hugely challenging work of recognizing, understanding and ultimately rejecting punishment, no matter its form or source.

TJ is a collective response to violence and lives under the umbrella of “community-based responses to violence.” It reminds us that violence and harm have collective impact and therefore necessitate collective responses, rather than the traditional individual-heavy responses that we are sold. Repeatedly, we are told that justice equals an individual court settlement or individual punishment or healing. Instead, TJ works to create collective responses that go beyond only those directly involved in the violence (i.e., survivor(s) and the person/people who were violent or harmful) and include bystanders, people who have relationship to those directly involved in the violence, as well as the broader community.

TJ works to meet immediate needs of current incidences of violence in ways that support our long-term visions for community and liberation. For example, if we understand that prisons are violent and oppressive and our vision for liberation includes abolishing prisons, then our current responses would strive to not perpetuate and reinforce the prison industrial complex. TJ seeks to connect incidents of violence (e.g. rape, physical abuse, robbery, police brutality, child sexual abuse) with the conditions that create and perpetuate them (e.g. patriarchy, transmisogyny, poverty, global capitalism, white supremacy, ableism, ownership of children and land). TJ works to respond to violence in ways that *transform the conditions that allowed for the harm and violence to happen in the first place*.

Transformative justice recognizes that violence doesn't exist in a vacuum. There is a context within which violence happens and there are conditions that create and perpetuate violence. It does not mean that individuals should not be accountable for their behaviors or the harm they cause, but we must build our capacity to simultaneously hold individual and collective responsibility and accountability with nuance, wisdom and curiosity. The same can be true for preventing and stopping violence. We have a collective responsibility to prevent and stop violence. We can also identify, create, and support the kinds of conditions that can *support our interventions* to violence and hopefully prevent violence from happening all together. We can work to collectively cultivate conditions such as connection, transparency, sustainability, community, trust, belonging, taking accountability, healing, de-escalation and direct communication. Our work is not only to respond to current incidents of violence without relying on punishment and harm, but also to work to prevent violence and transform our relationships, families and communities. We are not only resisting what we don't want, we are also working to build the kind of world we ultimately long for and dream of.

TJ is both response *and* prevention: How can we respond to violence in a way that both meets immediate needs and simultaneously works to prevent future incidences of violence from happening? TJ is 'what is' *and* 'what could be'; everything we have always known and everything we need to learn. What I mean is that TJ is simultaneously incredibly simple and incredibly complex. TJ is both pragmatic and visionary, not sacrificing one for the other. At its best, I have seen TJ be organic, accessible, and born out of the very conditions it seeks to grow.

Our communities have been trying to respond to harm in ways that do not create more harm for generations, even if we did not call it TJ. Many of us can probably recall stories from our own lives of how we responded to violence within our families and communities. And for many of us, calling the police has *never been an option*—because the police are likely to inflict more or greater harm—so we have been trying to patch together responses for as long as we can remember.

Capitalism is inherently violent and abusive and as such, all work to challenge capitalism is an intervention to violence. Work to transform violence is anti-capitalist and anti-capitalist efforts are necessarily practices of TJ. Violence is a cornerstone of capitalism. The violence of capitalism and the ways that capitalism necessarily uses violence to maintain and expand its power are deeply intertwined and at times indistinguishable. In addition, capitalism normalizes exploitation and lack of consent, setting the state for harm and violence.

Violence and abuse not only serve to reinforce the culture and conditions of capitalism, but they continue to be hugely profitable and necessary markets themselves: war and surveillance, militarization, hate violence, child abuse, human trafficking, murder,

torture and prisons—none of which are mutually exclusive. Beyond profit, state systems such as prisons, police, the criminal legal system, the medical industrial complex, and the foster care system rely on violence and are sites of violence themselves whether physical, emotional, psychological and/or sexual; the breaking of connection and relationships; displacement and isolation; or commodification and dehumanization. State responses to violence often take the form of social control aimed at targeting oppressed communities, such as poor communities, communities of color, disabled, undocumented and/or trans communities under the guise of “safety,” “protection,” “rescue,” and “cure.”

Anyone who has been involved in TJ work has felt how capitalism (and the trauma it causes) has threatened and hindered our responses to violence. This work directly challenges the culture of capitalism at every level. It challenges a capitalist culture that tells us that we are ultimately disposable and only worth as much as we can produce or the resources that can be exploited from our bodies; that tells us that violence and abuse are profitable and necessary, and that independence, disconnection, and isolation are admirable ways to live.

Transformative Justice is an anti-capitalist practice. This is not only because cycles of violence and the trauma they produce are highly profitable, useful and necessary under capitalism, but also because these cycles undermine our best attempts to fight for a more just world. How can we fight against gentrification, if our anti-gentrification coalition is irrevocably fractured because we didn’t know how to handle conflict? Or because we chose not to deal with the sexual assault that happened within the coalition? What good is winning a major campaign if relationships are so badly damaged that no one wants to work together again? Our inability to effectively respond to harm and violence—and even conflict and misunderstandings—continue to plague our efforts to grow the kinds of relationships we need for all liberatory work.

TJ challenges us to find creative solutions and strategies that do not replicate a capitalist culture of distrust, domination, violence, oppression and exploitation. It means building responses to violence within our communities that do not rely on the state *and* actively cultivate the very things that we know will prevent violence such as accountability, safety and healing. It means growing the conditions that can support TJ.

TJ is grounded in relationships. If we do not have strong relationships with each other, if we are not connected in meaningful ways, we will not be able to effectively transform or prevent harm. We are up against a heavily documented epidemic of loneliness, a crisis of belonging and generations of unhealed trauma. Organizers carry their pain and trauma with them to every meeting, zoom call, conference, coalition, campaign and into every relationship they are a part of. We act as if the only “real work” is organizing a protest or mutual aid campaign, direct action or strategy session and then wonder why so much of our “real work” continues to fall apart.

To end capitalism, we must be able to respond to harm, violence and abuse within our communities. We must stop outsourcing this work to systems and cultures wedded to punishment and criminalization that profit off our pain and trauma. Just as we would work to create community-owned and run housing, food and education, we must also work to build the individual and collective skills and practices to support healing, growth, accountability and repair.

Pods

One of the most effective ways to build our relationships within TJ is to build pods. A pod is a tool to address and prevent harm, violence, emergency or crisis. Pods can be used to address specific needs and aid in general support. Pods are made up of the people in our lives we can rely on and turn to first. When we are referring to pods in the context of TJ we are often talking about harm and violence, both how to respond in real time or after the fact, as well as how to prevent or plan for when harm may occur. However, pods can be used in a myriad of different contexts, far beyond acute harm and violence. And it should be noted that even though there may not be acute harm, the mere use of pods and their wide dissemination into many aspects of our lives helps to create the conditions that can lessen both the impact of harm and the likelihood that harm will happen in the first place. Pods are a simple concept with an endless amount of uses and applications. Pods are a way to make words such as “community” and “support” more concrete and pragmatic.

Mapping our pods forces us to get clear about what kinds of relationships we have in our lives and what kinds of relationships we want *and need* in our lives to practice TJ. It allows us to reflect on why we don't have more authentic relationships in our lives and how we can change that. It helps us begin to think about what skills and capacities our pod has and what skills we need to build.

Pods are one of the few everyday tools that is an explicit practice and condition of TJ. Pods are essential for accountability and healing because both are most effective when they happen in relationship with others. Pods help us to identify and create the people and relationships within which accountability and healing could take place. In an age where very few people feel like they belong and far too many live isolated from authentic relationships, let alone ones that could offer care, the act of building pods in and of itself has the power to transform.

Building our pods is a concrete way to prepare and build resources for transformative justice in our communities. Building pods is also a way to practice and cultivate liberation through values such as care, support, healing, accountability, community, love, interdependence, repair, belonging, trust, courage and possibility. Pods invites us into a more connected way of living that resists isolation, fear and hopelessness, some of the many factors that allow for harm to occur. If everyone had a pod, imagine how

much more resourced and supported we would all be. Imagine how much more accountable and brave we might attempt to be. Imagine what could be possible inside of our communities, neighborhoods, cities and movements for justice.

Building New Worlds

The work of TJ is to not only resist capitalism and other oppressive systems, but to also build new kinds of relationships, communities and worlds for all of us. TJ asks us to imagine what a world without state and interpersonal violence would look and feel like. A world where we lovingly and committedly care for each other and ourselves; where rape and torture are understood as historical forms of violence; and where people proactively take responsibility to change their actions, instead of waiting to be “held accountable.”

Most of us come to transformative justice before we realize how much we don't know. It is humbling work. Many of us come to this work out of frustration about what we have, or rather *what we don't have*, and what we so desperately need and want to create. For many of us, this work reflects the things we already knew and did in our own lives, even before we knew about “TJ.” Some of us accidentally find the work through a wrong turn or a way home. Others seek it out, hungrily scanning the horizon for the faint glow of a lighthouse and once ashore, never set sail again.

However we come to the work of transformative justice, even if we do not stay, even if we end up burnt or bruised or more heartbroken than when we began, one thing is certain: there is a moment of hope. Even if it is small, even if it fades, there is a moment of hope for the compelling, sometimes nagging, possibility of community accountability and transformative justice. A moment that pulls us in—all of us—even those of us who have only been tangentially involved in a response. A moment that taps into our grief and longing for *the mere possibility* of creating something different than more cruelty and more trauma. Something that could be healing, something that could be transformative. A glimmer of green pushing up through the concrete. It is in those moments where some of our greatest potential lives.

Fundamentally, TJ hinges on our ability to imagine a different future for ourselves and our communities. Whether it is the possibility of healing, the ache for a world where no one ever fears being sexually assaulted, the dream of loving and respectful relationships, or even just the hazy stubborn determination that one day we will break generational cycles of abuse. In order to engage in TJ work we must develop and strengthen what we believe is possible of ourselves, our communities, and the world. We must believe that there can be a different way beyond the usual binaries of guilt and innocence filled with shame and blame, punishment and revenge, oppression and exploitation, isolation and disposability, trauma, fear, and the breaking of relationship. We must believe in repair, reconciliation, and transformation. We must believe that we can come back from the hard, painful and

harmful. Capitalism relies on our complacency and our acceptance of the crumbs. The very act of dreaming and not just fighting *against* something, but *building what we believe is possible* continues to anchor our work. We are practicing new ways of being that allow us to be more human, not less. We are growing new paths of freedom, healing and love. We are building the futures we are dreaming.

Mia Mingus is a writer, educator and trainer for transformative justice and disability justice. She is a queer physically disabled korean transracial and transnational adoptee raised in the Caribbean. She works for community, interdependence and home for all of us, not just some of us, and longs for a world where disabled children can live free of violence, with dignity and love. As her work for liberation evolves and deepens, her roots remain firmly planted in ending sexual violence.

HERE IN SOCIALIST AMERICA - Nomy Lamm, 2012

My cat is pawing at my face before the street cleaner comes by, rubbing her teeth against my knuckles, reminding me to take her to the vet soon, the crusty thing on the back of her neck is getting grosser by the day. She's ancient, at least eighteen, black with big kittenish yellow-green eyes, her health a delicate balance of expensive wet foods, powders to make her poop, an electric water fountain, and occasional trips to the vet to squeeze her anal glands and trim her nails. Now this thing that's been on the back of her neck for ten years is starting to ooze and crust, and I'm on my own, this isn't Aura's responsibility anymore, I can't just ask her to put it on her credit card. And yesterday two thirty-dollar checks from the Department of Rehab disappeared into thin air, I had them in my hand and then they were gone, I looked everywhere: in my cubby in the hall, on top of all the bookshelves, in all the piles in my room, in the recycling. I'm pretty sure my bank account is overdrawn. So, that's what I wake up thinking about. Money.

My eyes meander across the long yellow room with its high arching ceilings, the flat morning light filtering in through the blinds, the sounds of Folsom Street willing me into the world – cars, a motorcycle, and now a siren, and now the sound of an accordion from across the street. I put on a turquoise and white striped dress with fringe along the neck and hem, and open the blinds to let the light in. I clear off surfaces, tidying up my piles with an eye out for those checks, then go to the kitchen to make my morning coffee.

My new voice student, Bernice, is five minutes early. She is nervous and giggly, clutching a pink vinyl bag to her chest. I invite her to come down to the kitchen while I finish making my coffee. She sits at the pink formica table while I heat milk in a pan. She's an herbalist, I met her through a queer anti-violence project.

"I love your house," she says, her head swiveling, taking in the checkered floor, yellow walls, the clutter of a loved home, pointing up at the aprons that hang from lines across the ceiling. "These Victorians are so beautiful."

"We got super lucky," I tell her, plunging the coffee. "When Aura and I moved in we didn't have to sign a lease or pay a deposit or anything, we just met with the landlord and he was like 'Welcome to the family! Stay forever!'" This is a rare story in San Francisco.

"That's a dream come true," she twirls a tendril of black curly hair around her finger. "But how is he about fixing things when they break? That's the problem with easygoing landlords, they think they don't have to do anything."

“He actually does take care of things.” I offer her some water and lead the way back out of the kitchen. “See, like the new paint job?” I gesture to our pink and blue living room. “He paid for that. We even got to pick the colors, we wanted it to look like a cupcake.” I open the door to the front hallway and lead her toward the front of the house, to my room.

“I hope I find a good place to live soon,” Bernice says, pausing to look at the books in the hallway. “I’ve been here four months and I’m still couch surfing.”

This is a familiar story.

“That’s so hard. You’ll find something,” I tell her, noticing tension in my own belly, the anxiety of uncertainty. My new date Chaps is in a similar situation.

When we enter my room Bernice’s face lights up and her smile gets even bigger. Gold frames, painted unicorns, musical instruments, tchachkes and altars, a tarot spread on top of a bass amp, stuffed animals and a leafy red begonia. This is my realm.

“It feels so good in here. I love this.” She points to a drawing of two crows, their feet clasped together, spinning in the air.

“That’s love,” I say, reaching my hands out into the air, imitating the crow feet. “That feeling of equal meeting in freefall, holding on and swinging through the universe together.” She is looking at me with sparkly eyes. “I try to meet all my moments that way,” I say, feeling exposed, but that’s what I like about teaching voice lessons in my bedroom. Opportunity to share my magic.

I sit in front of the electric piano and instruct her to take a seat opposite me. I prop my fake leg up next to the heater.

“Let’s find ourselves in the room,” I say. “Close your eyes and just notice the subtle movement of your breath... the sounds of the environment...” The noisy belch of a bus coming to a stop outside. The mechanical trickle of the cat fountain. A group of teenagers on break from school.

“Acknowledging and thanking the Ohlone people whose land we are occupying... we sense into our relationship with gravity, the parts of our bodies making contact with the floor and the chair... releasing into that support...”

I watch her, long eyelashes resting on her smooth brown cheeks, black curly hair piled high on her head, her palms flat on her thighs, thumbs sticking through the holes of her hoodie, trusting me. We practice emptying our lungs all the way out, filling all the way

back up, noticing the difference. We stretch, expanding and contracting our whole bodies, pretending our faces are the center, like a starfish. We rev our lips like motorboats and make hahaha noises, let our jaws hang and shake them out, make siren sounds and sing long open notes pushing air through each of the vowel sounds. Acting silly, getting the body ready to sing, helping the mind let go of judgment.

Bernice loves to sing but she holds herself tight in her guts. She doesn't know how to notice when she goes out of tune, but she can tell something's not right. We do some exercises at the piano, I ask her to ground into her feet, lift up through the top of her head, breathe big, open up. She starts sounding more relaxed and this deep, clear voice comes out. We sit facing each other again and play with sound, improvising, seeing what comes out, letting our voices merge and interact. We sway in our seats, waving our hands, moving energy around, and then the soft sound of a harp coming from my phone lets us know the hour is up.

"That was amazing," she says. We sit with the tangible presence buzzing in the air between us. "Ancestors."

"Yeah." It feels so good to be recognized and present with another person.

"Wow," she says, shaking herself out of it, digging in her bag for her wallet. She hands me twenty dollars. "So I'll come back on Thursday to make tinctures with you. I was thinking we'll start with hawthorn – good for the heart."

"Awesome." We negotiated a partial trade, twenty bucks a lesson and then she'll teach me about herbal medicine. The cash is supposed to go into an envelope in my underwear drawer, which I then try to forget about. Sometimes it grows. Today, though, as I'm putting the money in, I realize I have to harvest. I count out five twenties, everything I've managed to save, and stick it in my bra.

As I'm letting Bernice out I pick up the stack of mail lying on the floor in front of the mail slot. There is a statement from the bank. As I thought, my account is overdrawn and they've charged me an extra \$22. The balance is negative \$99.27. Staring at the number I feel my bubble of presence dissipate into the gridwork of survival. *Where the hell could those checks have gone? They were in my hand, and then...* Then there's more mail from the Social Security department, telling me I owe them \$2,976, which they will slowly take from me, \$50 a month. I've already been over this with them, I don't actually owe them anything, but I will have to go back to the office to argue with them about it again. This time I will have to get it in writing.

I leave the house with a list of errands, the hundred dollars from my underwear drawer, and a stack of letters from Social Security. As I'm walking to the car I hear the call of

crows overhead. I stop and look up at them as they swoop across the street, disappearing over the rooftops.

“Caw! Caw!” I shout.

They ignore me.

I get in my car, a purplish brown cube, roomy, comfy, ok gas mileage, cute and weird. I bought this car with settlement money last year, after Aura and I won a class action lawsuit against our old landlords, who let the elevator of our six-story apartment building sit broken for eight months. I take down the disability placard and pull out of my parking spot, thinking about Aura and our little studio in the Tenderloin. At the time I was freshly approved for disability benefits, not working, not producing, not sure what to do with myself. Then the elevator broke and I was cloistered in that apartment with nowhere to go, writing down my dreams, meditating, singing, lighting candles, drinking tea, setting intentions. Listening to the sounds of the streets outside: Sirens, fights, negotiations, cops giving orders over loudspeakers, girls crying and screaming in the middle of the night. Sometimes if I laid in my bed and looked out the kitchen window at a specific angle I could see a tulip tree in an alley somewhere. *Beautiful, beautiful*, I would sing to the flowering tree, happy to be able to access some tiny piece of the natural world.

Now I live here, in the Mission. Aura is across town. We have separate lives. She is probably at band practice right now. It is February and it is sunny, one of the miracles of San Francisco seasons. I wonder if this is because of global warming. I feel spoiled. This city is amazing, one of the most expensive places in the world to live, and I seem to be floating through, held aloft in this tiny bubble I have come to think of as Socialist America.

Here’s the deal with Socialist America: The government pays my rent. The government pays my bills. The government pays for my psychotherapy, my bodywork, and my physical therapy for pelvic trauma. The government pays for my shiny black-patterned prosthetic leg and the swim foot that sticks on the end of my little leg so I can wear flippers when I swim laps. The government pays for my car insurance and oil changes and sometimes for registration and repairs. The government pays for clothes and shoes for school, but they have stopped covering bras and underwear, claiming they are not necessary. The government pays my tuition and pays for books and supplies and even mileage on my car. The government bought me a computer, though they won’t pay for its repairs. And, though I have a prescription and can legally have it delivered to my house, the government does not pay for my weed.

In exchange, I track and print receipts, collected in big manila envelopes, submitted for approval every six months. I give the government full access to my bank accounts, fill

out paperwork for re-assessment at regular intervals, and battle over incremental losses, spending hours on the phone and in waiting rooms, trying to keep myself securely and justifiably within the system. Keep all the different accounts in order, keep it all looking legal and legitimate. Social Security, Medicare, the Department of Rehabilitation, these are my patrons. I wormed my way in, spent years decoding this system, slowly accumulating resources, tracking what is available, negotiating between agencies, untangling bureaucracy. Somehow in this pocket of decline, with all the defunding of social services, the widespread joblessness and homelessness, I found this cradle.

Driving through the city, past my old apartment, I say *thank you thank you* to the broken elevator that bought me this car, that corner of the city where I first planted myself, where girls outside wait for customers, where I once saw a crow perched on the roof across the alley, looking in my kitchen window at me. It was the only crow I saw that first year in San Francisco, and I had been watching for them. In the northwest they are everywhere, hanging out on electric wires, playing pranks, acting like people. (Once I saw a pair of crows walking across the street in a crosswalk, stopping traffic.) Here in San Francisco I have learned to attune to their call, have learned to recognize the difference between a crow and a pigeon from a distance: the forward thrust of the head and neck, the more streamlined arc of the wings. I get excited when I see them, I call out to them, longing to connect. I wish I could hug them, I want to touch them, but I tell myself I don't think they would like that.

I pull onto the back road that leads to the parking lot of my credit union. There is construction, as usual, orange cones and diamond-shaped signs. I park in the disabled spot, go inside and use the ATM to deposit my five twenties. It's taken me a while to figure out the rules, for some reason the money goes in quicker if I deposit it through the machine instead of a teller; mechanisms that have nothing to do with laws of nature. I don't get it, but I learn the rules and follow them, try not to take the randomness personally. The machine spits out a receipt, I now have sixty-three cents in my account. Plus twelve dollars and change in my wallet. Three more days to the first of the month.

When I walk back out of the bank, the first thing I hear, louder than the backhoe, is the sound of screaming crows. I look up. What is wrong? They are swooping and diving, they're pissed, freaking out. I feel my own agitation, the way my heart leaps around with the patterns of their flight, and follow them out of the parking lot. There, lying in the street, is a big, black, dead crow.

"Oh no..." My heart seizes. I look up. No wonder they are so pissed. "What happened?" I look around for construction workers, wondering if they saw, if they know. "Did you see what happened?" I yell, but they don't notice. They are busy, not paying attention to me, or the crows.

I can't just leave it lying in the road. Again, I look around. There is a bush across the street with bark under it, I could lay it there and at least it won't keep getting run over.

"I'm so sorry about your friend," I call up to the ones keeping vigil overhead. "I'm going to move it okay?" They don't stop screaming.

I bend down and pick it up. Its body is warm. As I turn it over, its head flops to the side and its big scaly grey feet stick up at me. I get to see up close its wrinkled skin and talons, the big strong black beak, the gleaming feathers, feel its strong body in my hand. It's perfect. I actually wonder for a minute – *am I dreaming?* The crow friends overhead quiet for a moment and I see that they are flying to the corners of various buildings framing the alley. They are making a circle around me. I walk carefully over to the bush and gently lay the dead crow down in the bark. I start to say the kaddish, *yitkadal v'yitkadash sh'mey rabah...* but can't remember much. I look up into the blue sky right as one crow flies over my head. A feather drops from its tail and I watch it helicopter to the ground, coming to rest underneath a car. I lie down on the pavement next to the car, using my cane to fish it out. Suddenly a man is standing over me.

"Are you okay ma'am?" He's an older black man in an orange polo shirt, grabbing at my arm, trying to pull me up.

"I'm fine, I'm just, I'm trying to get this feather." I try to wave him away.

He hovers there as I use my cane to drag the feather from under the car. I pick it up and inspect it before hoisting myself up. The man grabs at my elbow again.

"Thanks, I'm fine," I tell him. "See?" I hold the feather toward him. It's about four inches long, black with a purplish-greenish gloss, contrasting a milky white rachis.

"What's that?" he asks. "Raven feather?" He holds his hand out toward it, but he doesn't grab.

"I think these are crows, because they sound like 'caw!'" I point my finger in the air and we listen. "Ravens have more of a rattle."

"Right, right. And aren't ravens bigger than crows?" he says. "And they have those mustaches."

I laugh, and he laughs, and something flashes between us. I can see my own desire reflected in his eyes, and then I'm nervous.

“Look,” I point the feather toward the bush, where the dead crow lies. There is a cat! – out on the street in the Tenderloin! – a big orange tabby, sniffing at the crow. It looks fed, soft, protected. What is it doing out here?

“The circle of life,” the man says. Then: “What happened to your leg?”

I look away. I breathe in my environment. The screaming birds overhead, their dead friend being swatted at by an escaped housecat. The intermittent sound of a jackhammer at the end of the block. A car drives by, scaring the cat. I watch its orange tail disappear down an alley, breathing in the smell of tar and sidewalk pee, mixed with the man’s very strong cologne.

“That’s never the first thing I tell people about myself,” I say, smiling, starting to walk away.

“Oh! It’s like that!” he teases, following me as I walk toward my car. I feel aware of my limp, and of him watching me. “Should we get to know each other over a burger?”

“No thanks,” I say, getting in the car. I can’t help but smile. “Places to go, people to see!” I gotta get to the Social Security office. I am hungry though. I wave to him as I pull away.

I drive past the park where I usually swim three times a week. Day laborers crowd around a trash can, playing cards. A little girl with a sparkly headband stands on top of the slide, her hand over her eyes surveying her territory. The pool has been closed for a month and a half, and I feel it in my body, stiff, clenched in the right hip, vibrating metallic energy from my pelvis where the strap used to be buckled tight for all those years. *The strap isn’t there anymore*, I remind myself. The longer I go without swimming, the more I wiggle in my seat, digging the edge of my fake leg out of the fold of my hip, feeling trapped.

In my worst fantasies, I’m forever owned by this lineage of control that’s implanted itself in me. The Shriners, those lovers of poor crippled children, they colonized my body, they cut off my foot and brainwashed me to emulate normal. Like the body doesn’t matter. Like I should spend my whole life proving myself, measuring myself against other people, trying to show how special and capable I am. It’s taken me over thirty years to be able to say that I know deep down that it didn’t have to happen that way. I could have kept my foot. I could have worn a fake leg with the toes of my little foot sticking out the front. Or I could have hopped everywhere. Or I could have lived on the side of a hill and only walked in one direction. Or I could have built a giant spring to bounce on.

I circle the block, looking for parking, thinking about options. There's a formula you're supposed to follow, when you're born you start the process, the train isn't gonna stop for you. Even if something totally insane happens to you, like they cut off your foot when you're three years old, you still have to keep growing up, learning to read and do math and jumping jacks, taking tests, getting socialized, going to school, learning to work, worrying about money, denying any deeper needs because you don't even get to stop and see what they are, you're not supposed to get a break. But I believe I have found a loophole. For the moment at least. It wasn't easy to find. I had to slip through the cracks of Capitalism into a deeper web of time, chart the days spent crying in bed, the pain, the hole where the pain should be. The place in my back and hip that I can't feel, a buzzing forcefield of numbness.

At thirty years old I landed back in my mom's house, living on GA-X while I waited for the government to decide my fate. I would lay in bed crying, listening to the voices of the volunteers in my mom's basement wafting up through the heating vents, volunteers who answered letters for Books to Prisoners. There's a whole library down there. I would listen to them talk about the prison industrial complex, their political arguments merging into my own obsessive vision, the uprising I've been planning since I was three years old: *How to get the kids out of the hospital so we can play!* I would lie there frozen in bed, my pelvis buzzing, like a foreign object had been placed inside my body and plugged into an electrical outlet. There was nothing else I could do. This is how bad it has to be to get a break.

Now I'm parked outside the Social Security office. I can't move. My heart is beating too hard, I can't get a deep breath, my thoughts are looping. I'm remembering how they wanted to know why I didn't go back to work for my dad. *It says here you worked as a receptionist, my case worker said. When I was fifteen!* I panicked. *I'm not a receptionist, I can't sit that long in one place, it hurts too much, I need to lay down, I need to move around, I need some fucking time to figure this shit out, I can't keep pushing myself and then crashing like I have been, I can't do it..* I was counseled by friends who've been through the process to be as pathetic as possible, to cry, but to be specific, tell them what's hard. Tell them I can't get out of bed, can't stop crying. Don't play to my strengths. Gotta show them how bad it is.

I find some deeper breaths and remember my tools, noticing the sounds in my environment (car, car, a guy riding past on a bike with a boombox playing "Eye of the Tiger). Noticing the support of gravity, my butt in the seat. I don't need to be that pathetic anymore, life is actually good, and I'm in the system, I don't have to work so hard to prove myself, I just gotta keep track of my shit. For someone who didn't pay taxes for years, who believed that the whole structure was about to crumble, that we were building something else to replace it, I have managed to magically submit and organize myself within it pretty effectively. It is survival, and protection, for now. I grab the letters from Social Security, my wallet and my cane, and emerge from my lego car

onto Valencia street. Need food. Look around. Healthfood store down the block. Getting that light-headed panic, that belly-full-of-coffee feeling. I walk down the street, focusing on the tension in my hips, trying to relax, to not treat the one-block walk as an endurance test.

I enter the health food store urgent for protein, fill a bag with organic almonds and take them up to the register. “Seven dollars and forty-two cents,” says the guy behind the counter. “What? It’s not even a meal,” I scowl. He looks away. I pull out my wallet and count out seven one-dollar bills, a quarter, a dime, a nickel and two pennies. I feel myself kind of hovering over my body, managing myself, coaxing myself along. I walk quickly back to the Social Security office, feeling swift, the ground moving beneath my feet, pushing off from the pavement with my cane. The security guard nods as I enter the somber old marble building, and I take a number. E4. All the numbers up on the board are A, B and D. No E. There is a woman trying to speak English to a clerk, she needs a Social Security card. The clerk realizes she is not a citizen. “You can’t have a Social Security card,” he tells her. A 20-or-so year old dude is listening to his headphones really loud. I bet it sounds good to him, but all we hear is the really tinny annoying part of it. The security guard taps him on the leg and gestures for him to turn it off. Dude ignores him, won’t look at him, but then he does turn it down. I scoot past an elderly Asian couple and a middle aged Black woman with long gold fingernails, to an empty seat near the window. I take off my leg. This will probably take a while.

I look around and think about how we could all organize together and overthrow the system. I used to have so many good ideas. Alone in the hospital without anyone who loved me, I would think very seriously about the games I wanted to play with the other kids, when and if I had the opportunity. We would play so good that our world would get stronger, we would get so powerful that we couldn’t be stopped by the doctors and nurses who held us prisoner there, not even by the Shriners, with their weird faux-Arabian Fezes decorated with Masonic symbols, their clown makeup and tiny cars, their zombie eyes that cast a metaphysical grid of impossibility around our reality. We would have to do it from the inside out. The game would evolve, the dream would never end. This is the dream. This office. This is what humans created. I am creating something else. Not by fighting it. By releasing my fire into it. Electrifying the neurons. Zap zap. My body drains batteries, I’ve watched it happen. I eat my almonds.

E4 is announced over the loudspeaker. It flashes in red at counter number three. I stand up and begin the process of putting on my leg. Hike up my skirt, pull the prosthetic sock over the top of the socket.

“E4!” Yells the lady at counter three.

“I’m coming,” I say, twisting the socket so that it’s aligned when I push down into it.

“E4!” she yells again.

My leg suctioned into place and I collect my wallet and the stack of letters, grab my cane, and cross the wait area to counter three. “You know, I’m here because I have a disability,” I say. “It takes a minute.”

“I didn’t see you,” she says. “ID?”

I give her my license and show her the most recent letter I received. I try to explain the situation. They’re taking away more money than they are supposed to. I’ve already been here and they said they fixed it. Her nails go clickety-clack on her keyboard.

“Take a seat, someone will come out that door on the left and call your name.”

I sit back down, unsure of whether it makes sense to take off my leg again. I want to ask how long it will be but she’s with someone else now. I perch on the edge of the seat. After a minute I try to sit back in the chair, but the socket pushes my left side up, wrenching my spine, digging into my hip. The buzzing in my pelvis gets stronger. “Fuck this shit,” I mutter, but not too loud. I can’t sit here like this. I need to be comfortable. I push the button that releases the valve that allows in air which releases the suction so that I can pull my little leg out of the socket. I prop my fake leg up against the chair next to me, shiny black socket that shows the exact shape of my body, striped black and white sock covering the leather calf. Sensible gold mary jane shoe. Mechanical knee visible in the back. People don’t stare too much. I appreciate the veneer of privacy.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. 402 number, where the fuck is that? For some reason, I answer it.

“Hello?” I’m already annoyed.

“Hi, is this Magdalen Clew?”

“Yes, who is this?” I say. Shit, the security guard is looking at me.

“Hi, my name is Brian, I’m calling from the Human Rights Campaign. As you know, we’ve had some major wins lately, with gay marriage in (blankety-blank) states, and the recent repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, but the Republicans aren’t sleeping, and neither can we, now we are asking you to partner with us, to show your support for the important work that the Human Rights Campaign is...”

The security guard points to a sign that says NO CELL PHONE CONVERSATIONS. Then he points to the door. I wave my finger and shake my head, pointing to my leg.

“Hey, Brian, I have to interrupt you, I’m sure that’s great for a lot of people, not so much for me, I mean, I’m queer but I’m not into the military...” Maybe I shouldn’t have said that out loud in the SSI office. The elderly couple across from me stares straight ahead, not registering a reaction.

“Okay, so you’re gay, so you know how important marriage equality is,” says Brian, with a familial lilt. “Certainly important enough to support with your hard earned dollars and cents?”

“Well, I have to tell you, right now I’m sitting in the Social Security office,” I say. “I’m trying to get the government to stop taking away money that I need. So you should probably move on to the next person on your list, since I can’t give you anything.” I say it all in an even tone. I used to be a telemarketer, so I always try to talk to them like they’re people. It’s hard, because they have a script they have to follow, and they are being monitored.

“Well, we’re not just looking for a financial arrangement, we’re really looking for friends,” says Brian.

“You want to be my friend?” This makes me laugh. Now the security guard is coming my way. “Shit, Brian, I gotta go.”

“Well for just a hundred and twenty dollars, and you can pay that in installments of just ten dollars a month, that would make you a junior level giver, and that would go a long way towards making sure the Republicans can’t take away our rights – yours and mine.” Brian is doing a good job of following the script but also keeping his voice friendly and personable, like it’s just the two of us having a conversation.

“You know, I would love to argue about this with you more, but the security guard is coming over to tell me to get off the phone, and it’s not worth it to me to put on my leg and leave the building.”

“Oh, well... I guess, okay,” he sounds confused, he almost leaves his script, and then, “Well I hope we can count on your support in the future.”

“Goodbye Brian.”

“I hope you get better,” he says. I hang up.

“Magdalen Clew,” says my case worker, holding the door open.

“Just a minute,” I say, standing up and starting the process.

“Take your time,” she says, looking elsewhere.

I follow her back into a maze of cubicles, into the far corner. On the wall there is a photograph of someone hang-gliding. It says *You will never know your potential until you allow yourself to try.*

“Nice inspirational art,” I say.

“I didn’t pick it,” she says, blowing her nose. “Sorry, I have a cold.”

“That sucks.” I take off my leg and get comfortable across from her. I show her the most recent letter I received. I remind her about the last time I was here, how she put the numbers in her computer and it gave her a way lower number. She nods, and writes some things down with a pencil on a little pad of paper. She scratches something out. She types some things into her computer.

“So this is because of the settlement you received,” she says.

“Yes,” I say. “I remember. You said it only counted for the month I received it.”

She types and doesn’t say anything. I look at my phone. My heart jumps when I see a text from Chaps: “COMIN FER U BEBE.”

I write back: “bring it!”

I smile and watch the caseworker’s hands on the keyboard. Her nails are natural, unpainted. For a moment I try to picture her at home, wondering what she does with her hands in her own time. I imagine her cooking, painting, gardening, learning sign language...

“Okay, it looks like we owe you a hundred and eleven dollars and seventeen cents,” she says, punching some keys, printing something out. “Sign here.”

“Wait, what?” I’m shocked. “You owe me?”

“Yes, it will be deposited into your account with your SSI money on the first.” She writes an x on the paper and hands me the pen.

“So what am I signing?”

“Oh it’s just standard, your first born, all that,” she deadpans. I skim the text. It says that I authorize them to deposit one hundred eleven dollars and seventeen cents into my bank account. I sign. I tell her I think it’s funny that I have to sign for them to give me money but not to take it away. She tries to explain, I tell her I was just kidding. She looks exhausted. I put my leg on. She follows me out. “Leslie Morris,” she calls out the door as I exit. The woman with the gold fingernails stands up and we pass each other. I nod at her, and wonder why I was called first.

Chaps is waiting for me on the front steps when I get home, tapping her magenta cowboy boots, wearing a turquoise sequined headband, her dark hair sticking up in a kind of eighties swoop. I feel warm inside as soon as I see her. There’s something so familiar about her, even though it’s only been a few months. She looks like a Muppet, like Charlie Chaplin, like a good old fashioned nineties dyke, like something I hoped was real and had to wait a long time to find. Freak.

“Hi!” she yells. “Hi hi!” She waves her hand, and accidentally flings a piece of pizza down the stairs. It lands on the sidewalk. “Damn it!” She runs down after it, picks it up and inspects it, blows on it. She looks at me, stricken. “I’m so hungry,” she says. “This pizza is really good.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I say. She wrinkles her mustached lip and stamps a foot, slouching like a little kid. “You don’t have to eat it. We have other food.”

“But I waaant it,” she whines. “Sorry, sorry. Hi. Hi sweetie.” She kisses me. I can taste the pizza. “Getting my Italian on,” she says, smiling with a gap-toothed open mouth. God she’s cute.

“You could put it in the microwave. That’ll probably kill any sidewalk germs.” I climb the steps, doing the one-legged lift that I am most aware of when I know there’s somebody behind me. I unlock the door while she runs her hands over my back and around my belly. Once in the door she traps me against the wall, kisses me and sucks on the tip of my tongue. I feel myself melt into her, leaning toward her as she pulls away.

“You look so happy,” she says, planting a kiss on my nose. She does a funny dance and crosses her eyes at me.

“It’s nice to see you,” I smile. “Cutie.” I open the door to my bedroom. My cat looks at me from the bed with alarmed eyes. Her bowl is licked clean. “Sorry, I’ll feed you right away.”

In the kitchen, Chaps digs through the fridge while I mix psyllium husks into a third of a can of wet cat food, squishing it evenly with a fork. Chaps finds kale, onions, half a lemon, and a sour cream container full of rice, and piles them onto the pink formica table. She loves to find the food that is about to go bad and make good use of it.

“Guess what? I found twenty dollars on the floor at work, so I bought some beef,” Chaps wiggles her butt in excitement. She’s eating the piece of pizza now, I guess she decided it was okay, or forgot about the contamination. “You hungry baby?”

“Starving,” I say. All I’ve eaten today were those almonds. And coffee. I’ve got to stop doing that. Chaps takes off her hoodie and grabs mine off the back of my chair, hangs them both up together on a hook on the door. She’s wearing a t-shirt with a homemade stencil of a green fist that says “BEINGS OF ALL GALAXIES.”

“You like it?” she models, holding up her fist. “The green fist represents, you know, like solidarity with the earth, and solidarity with our alien brethren...”

“Far out, man,” I smile.

She starts chopping onion and garlic, throws them in a pan with some olive oil, soon she’s got another pan with steaks sizzling. It smells so good, I’m salivating, excited for meat. It’s only been a few years now that I’ve been eating meat, I was vegetarian since childhood, but my body told me it needed more protein. I’m working really hard at listening to those kinds of messages.

“God it’s so nice to cook in a place where I’m not getting yelled at,” Chaps says. “I’m so fucking sick of living with fascist vegans.” She’s been asked to move out of her house for being too loud, too butch, too confrontational, too sensitive. Meanwhile at work she’s been trying to integrate into a kitchen culture where she’s the only woman, the only queer, the only one who’s not Mexican. There’s a pecking order, and she’s at the bottom. Or at least that’s how it feels, it’s complicated, they’ve all been working there for ten years or more, they all work second jobs, they expect to bust ass.

“You are always welcome to come over and feed me,” I say, reaching out to touch her back and then remembering she’s using a knife. I pull back, not wanting to distract her.

The kitchen door opens. “What’s going on in here?” It’s my roommate Clementine, big smile, glamorous red hair, green wool coat. She hangs her coat on the hook and sits down to roll a joint, telling us about her workday. She is the manager of a sex toy store, and today she had to ask a guy to leave because he kept asking for demos. “So I was like, ‘Sir, put the dildo DOWN,’” Sukie assumes a voice of authority, making me laugh and almost spit my water out. She hams it up: “Step AWAY from the dildo, sir.”

Chaps sets a bowl of greens on the table, then another bowl of buttery rice with walnuts, and then starts plopping these thick little steaks on our plates. We interrupt the conversation to thank her, and I cut into my steak, watching juice ooze from the pink flesh. It's redder than I'm used to, but when I bite into it I can't believe how good it tastes. Juicy. Alive. As soon as I swallow my first bite I feel more solid in my body.

We smoke the joint and Clemintine and I start singing a Regina Spektor song – *Hooked into machine, I'm hooked into, hooked into* – laughing with kale and strings of meat caught between our teeth. I tell Clemintine and Chaps about the \$111.17 from Social Security, and how it's showing up right as I had to plunder my cash reserve in order to cover my overdraft.

"I guess somehow it always seems to balance out," I say. "If I can roll with it and not get too freaked out."

"Exactly," says Chaps. "Faith. Just like, I know I'm gonna find a place. There's going to be somebody who needs my rent money." It's only a few days until the end of the month and she still doesn't know where she'll be living. "And if not," she says, hands out like she's weighing options, "I have my sheep skins to keep me warm. I'll go join the Occupy movement." This is the resourcefulness of someone who's familiar with being unhoused. We've already established that she shouldn't stay here, we're having fun falling in love, we don't wanna ruin it so early on by living together. But it feels weird to have a home when she doesn't. Unequal, unfair.

Back in my room I light a candle on my altar, illuminating the cut-out of a black crow, the tigers eye and mullein and sage, the tiny dead hummingbird Aura gave me. I remember the feather that the crow dropped for me earlier today. It's still stuck in the back of my hair. I pull it out, look at the individual barbs, the way they stick together to make a smooth blade, the places where they separate from each other. I smooth it with my fingers, in love with the shiny black opalescence, the white rachis, the perfect curve at the tip. I put it on my altar, and then a hand is placed tentatively on my back. Chaps is behind me. I tense and then relax. She takes her hand away.

"You got a feather?" she says. I nod.

"A crow gave it to me." I think about telling her about the dead crow, how I held it in my hand, but I have a sense that may be too heavy for the moment. When I turn around her shirt is off, her suspenders hanging down, she's smiling, she takes my hand.

"Touch me..." She puts my hand on her chest and I trail my fingers down to her soft belly, then to her hand. We entangle our fingers and stare into each other's eyes. I can see that she is looking into my irises, not my pupils, watching the play of light in the

threads of blue and grey. I see her wildness, the thing in her that wants to blow with the wind. Now her pants are off and she's on the bed, still wearing her sequined headband and argyle socks. And now my leg is off and I am gloved, lubed, pushing into her.

"How is this possible?" she says. "I don't understand how it can feel so good to be alive, and then tomorrow I'll have to go back to work and get bossed around. How do people do it?"

"I don't know," I tell her. I really don't.

I fuck her like this for a while and then turned over with her ass in the air, and then some kind of disconnect happens, I can't tell what's going on for her.

"Are you okay?" I ask, slowing my movements.

"Where am I gonna live?" she says. "I'm scared. I'm don't want to be homeless anymore."

"Come here," I say, and she turns over and rolls into me. "It'll be okay. I believe in you." I think of myself as the ground, it spreads out beneath us, it is huge, it is real. I start to gently fuck her again and then she's like "harder," and I give it to her deeper and faster. I feel for the sensitive parts of my own hand, my own fingertips, and that lets me feel the sensitive parts of her body, and then she is arching her back and moaning, I'm pushing a fourth finger into her and she's sitting up and we're kissing, wet open mouths, her sex like a warm cozy mitten around my hand, my thumb on her clit, I say, "Baby, we're gonna figure it out. Everything is going to be okay."

She lays back and puckers her lips into an almost Billy Idol-sneer, she looks like a butch fag, and I tell her so. And then we are looking into each other's eyes again and she is looking surprised and she opens up, her body shakes, and she says "Oh my goddess, I win. I win."

I stay and feel her pulse for a while before I pull my hand out, turn the glove inside out and throw it across the room. I lie down next to her, on the cat pillow, since Chaps is allergic. One arm is bent up under my head, fingers in the air, my other arm wrapped tight around her middle. The cat is rubbing her teeth against my knuckles, her stinky catfood breath in my face. Shit I forgot to call the vet today. I'm going to have to ask Aura to help me pay for it. Where the fuck did those checks go? I remember the \$111.17 and remind myself, *balance*, and then my mind goes again to the dead crow I held in my hand outside the bank today. There is something important there, something I'm not sure how to think about. *I touched a crow*. Just this morning I was

explaining to Bernice how I think of love, like two crows with their feet clasped, spinning, trusting, free. *But it was dead.* What does it mean?

“What do you think of crows?” I ask as Chaps is drifting off to sleep.

“Not much,” she says, and sadness presses in on my chest.

“I mean, I guess I identify with the metaphor of them,” she reconsiders.

This makes me feel hopeful.

“What’s the metaphor?” I ask, burrowing my face into her, kissing her shoulder, feeling that buzzing in my pelvis, trying to connect.

“Like, homeless crusty punks.” She rolls away from me as I let this sink in, and before I have anything more to say, she is snoring.

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HOW TO BE A PERSON IN THE AGE OF AUTOIMMUNITY - Carolyn Lazard, 2013

“I’m afraid that then dialectics in its total abstrusity is only good for totally sick, ill, and mad people”

- Goethe to Hegel on October 18, 1827

This begins with the last meal I ate without being afraid. I remember it vividly. My friend Buyong was visiting me in Paris. I had already stopped working at that point because of pain in my joints. I was living off some money I’d saved. I was cautious of anything having to do with French bureaucracy, but mostly avoided seeking financial assistance because I had no idea what the fuck was going on with my body and assumed it was temporary. It was not.

I’d moved to Paris after graduating from college in the States. I needed a change and was trying to avoid New York for as long as possible. Paris wasn’t supposed to be a brief stint; I intended to make a life for myself there. In the year I lived there before I got sick, I worked part time in a restaurant and part time for a documentary production company.

Buyong and I were at some restaurant in the Marais—the kind of place populated by middleaged French ladies who lunch. This was good. Buyong was in France and I wanted her to have a very French meal in an extremely French place. We were winning. We started off with foie gras, followed by mussels and fries, crème brûlée, two espressos, and some cigarettes.

That night, I puked. The next day, I puked twice and shit ten times. Over the course of the following weeks, I continued to puke and shit exponentially: a scatological nightmare. Every cigarette made me puke. I lost over forty pounds and grew weak. My mother, across the Atlantic, cried into the phone. She thought I was dying. I finally took myself to the hospital and was admitted.

My rheumatologist suggested I go to the rheumatology ward at the Pitié Salpêtrière Hospital. I was the youngest person in the wing by about thirty years. I’d already had many rheumatologists over the course of that year who couldn’t diagnose my joint pain. Though I arrived complaining of extreme pain in my abdomen, fatigue, and persistent diarrhea, my symptoms were ignored because I was in the rheumatology wing. I was put on steroids for the joint inflammation. The nurses continued to bring me plates of French hospital food: massproduced gems like cow’s tongue, cod puree, and blood

sausage. One night, I fainted and knocked my head while I was in the bathroom. They started running every test they could.

After a full year of undiagnosed symptoms and an acute crisis in which I spent a total of three weeks in the hospital, finally, I got a diagnosis: Crohn's disease. That, and ankylosing spondylitis, one of those diseases that's as awkward to say as it is to live with. Both are autoimmune in nature. Crohn's is a disease of the intestinal tract, while AS affects the spine and peripheral joints. The doctors were sparing in their emotional presence. Of course, this is a critical ability in their profession. They explained to me the incurable and chronic nature of these diseases, that Crohn's and AS are manageable through lifelong treatment. At this point, I was struggling to understand. As a young person, I had recognized illness as a momentary state of incapacitation that would always go away. I had spent the whole year hoping my joint pains would be cured with antibiotics, or something. My mind invented increasingly elaborate explanations: maybe I'd contracted a virus from a friend who had traveled abroad; maybe I'd developed a bizarre allergy. But I hadn't.

The doctors insisted on a risky treatment of biologic drugs, either Humira or Remicade. Both are immune suppressants with the potential for terrifying side effects. Humira is self-injected every two weeks and Remicade is given as an infusion in a chemo center every other month. They told me there was no alternative, but I'd heard that there were other drugs worth trying. I refused to believe that the treatment they offered was my only option. I insisted on a second opinion and asked to be discharged. They sent in medical students, nurses, residents, interns, and doctors to tell me that biologics were the only way. I was eventually taken off of the ineffective anti-inflammatory steroids.

The supposedly chronic nature of the diseases got me searching for other options, and ultimately a more holistic view of the body. From my hospital bed, I would look up alternative treatments and scroll through Crohn's forums on my smartphone. Some people with Crohn's had their colons removed through multiple surgeries and were still dependent on medication. Some people quit their medications, adopted specialized diets, or went on extended fasts, and they claimed to be cured. I believed them and I still do. My doctors told me there is a lot of misinformation on the web. This is true, but I was willing to listen to the suggestions of people who actually lived with the disease over advice from those who merely studied it.

Suspicious of anyone who tells me there is a singular approach to anything, I decided to leave. I crawled out of the hospital and all the way back to my apartment. I still don't know how I came out of that flare without the help of medication, but I do have a hypothesis. Before receiving a colonoscopy, I was put on a liquid diet for a few days. The night before the procedure, I drank a foul laxative preparation. Since Crohn's

manifests as ulcers in the intestines, every time I ate it was like putting sandpaper to an internal open sore. Resting my bowels allowed me to slow down the flare. Eventually, I was able to eat soft foods such as bananas and avocados. I rested in my apartment until I had enough strength to leave. Incapable of taking care of myself physically or financially, I got on a flight home to Philadelphia as soon as possible.

The day after I landed, my knees started to swell and I couldn't walk again. Eventually, my digestive system gave way, too. This was my second flare, with many to come. The story continues as such: constant fatigue and discomfort punctuated by the brief, high dramas of flares and successive hospitalizations. I spent the greater part of two years lying down in a bed.

These kinds of experiences are difficult to narrativize. There is no story arc. In "On Being Ill," Virginia Woolf writes:

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light...it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia... But no; ... literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear.

This is, of course, the romantic view. Sometimes it's not true; sometimes I'm the same asshole I was before I got sick. But as Susan Sontag once wrote, "illness exacerbates consciousness." As such, my life has been irrevocably changed by the experience of illness. There is a lot of shame associated with disease. Disease is not polite conversation, and at my age, a career—not wellness—is the expected goal.

I give voice to this period of my life not as an inconvenient period, but as a profound one worthy of being shared. I want to valorize my time in ways that have nothing to do with work, to say a big "fuck you" to every person at a dinner party who has ever pointedly asked me, "So...what do you do?" because I haven't "done" much in a long time. The story I'm telling here is equal parts a processing of the trauma of illness and an exploration of how the body is treated under the regime of capitalism. Stories of illness like mine should not be kept away in beds and in hospital wards. They should be written so that we can understand the body as something beyond a sheet of plain glass.

The experience of sickness is profoundly alienating. The difficulty of communicating illness is evident in the poverty of language available to us to describe our physical ailments. We express by simile: *it feels like someone is stabbing me repeatedly with a sharp knife. It feels like someone is grabbing my intestines and squeezing them. It feels like I'm trapped in my own body.*

In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag speaks of the influential eighteenth-century French physician Marie François Xavier Bichat, who called health “the silence of the organs” and disease “their revolt.” Under the influence of that image, only when we are sick do we become aware of our otherwise static, humming organs. Then there’s the parlance of doctors, which is a language of war. *Your immune system is your body’s defense system. It has gone AWOL. We are here to defeat it.* A militaristic approach is the prevailing ideology regarding autoimmune disease.

My particular manifestation of autoimmunity is very specific—it occurs in my intestines and my joints—yet the basic mechanism is the same across a wide range of illnesses and symptoms. The immune system is perplexed and is driven to hyperactivity. *Autoimmune*—attacking the self. The immune system mistakes its own bodily materials for foreign agents and is confused about the distinction between self and other.

Autoimmune disorders are difficult to diagnose. For ankylosing spondylitis, the average time between the onset of symptoms and diagnosis is eight to twelve years. I was lucky; I only had to wait one year. But the process of diagnosis can often be discouraging and upsetting. Several specialists offered the wrong diagnoses, treated me with drugs unrelated to my condition, and called me hysterical—a hypochondriac. In contrast, I was also treated well by some very sympathetic and nurturing nurses. It reminded me that mediocre treatment is not necessarily the fault of individuals, but of understaffed hospitals. At the same time, I’m not the only one who has felt infantilized by doctors.

In “The Autoimmune Epidemic,” Donna Jackson Nakazawa writes, “Forty-five percent of patients with autoimmune diseases have been labeled hypochondriacs in the earliest stages of their illnesses. Some of this, no doubt, has to do with the fact that 75 percent to 80 percent of autoimmune disease sufferers are women, who are more easily dismissed by the medical establishment when hard-to-diagnose symptoms arise.” In my case, this was echoed by friends and family who suggested that my pain was psychosomatic or the result of depression. Often, the identities of people with invisible disabilities do not fit neatly into either disabled or able-bodied communities.

Autoimmune diseases are being diagnosed with increasing frequency and boomed in the postwar era of unregulated development. The Mayo Clinic reports that the number of patients with lupus has tripled in the United States over the past forty years.

Incidences of multiple sclerosis have risen at a rate of 3 percent every year in the U.K. and Scandinavia. Multiple sclerosis rates have doubled in the past forty years in Germany, Italy, and Greece, and type 1 diabetes has increased fivefold in the same time period. According to the NIH, twenty-four million Americans live with autoimmune disease.

Because of the rapid spread of autoimmune disease in industrialized nations, Nakazawa states, “Scientists the world over have dubbed it ‘the Western disease.’” The medical community remains unsure as to its origins, but often cites genetic factors. Others, unsatisfied with this weak causal explanation for these “Western” afflictions, have been exploring the environmental triggers of autoimmunity. One’s immune response is partially genetic. If you are not predisposed to autoimmunity, you are not likely to develop an autoimmune disease. Yet to not take into account environmental factors seems like a sanitization of a bizarre phenomenon, a reliance on the hermetic discourse of a medical field governed by specific protocols. I don’t mean to blame anyone specifically for the illnesses they have endured, but humans have likely participated in the creation of this situation. Our bodies have absorbed environmental degradation and the consequent chemical toxicity load.

If we explore the alternative to the medical community’s elusive explanation, we are left with a disease that is the result of unchecked capitalist production and its runoff. Just as autoimmune disorders have the confused body attacking itself, capitalism has humans attacking the natural world. Capitalism delineates a boundary between human society and the natural world; by separating them, it becomes easier to exploit the latter. What we are left with is bodies that are confused: incapable, on molecular level, of maintaining the basic boundaries that are constitutive of self. Mimicking, on a molecular level, the degrees of alienation and commodification that happen to the body on a social and economic level.

There are currently no known cures for most autoimmune diseases. They are discussed as chronic conditions that must be in a lifelong process of mitigation through biomedical means. My doctors would plead with me, as I shuffled into their offices with my walker, to take Humira. Biologics are a new class of drugs, barely a decade old, used to treat a few autoimmune conditions. Humira, which carries a black box warning, is an exact clone of a human antibody. It’s a human protein cultivated in the bodies of mice. These biologics function as immune-suppressants, essentially shutting down the body’s immune system to prevent it from attacking itself.

But, left without its defenses, the body becomes vulnerable to fatal cancers, other autoimmune diseases, and opportunistic infections; Humira’s medicine-as-technology counteracted my body’s self destructive but “natural” behavior. Forget the dualistic mode of thought, in which nothing was wrong with *me*, but something was wrong with my body. The idea is that I was deficient, and the only way to become the optimal

version of myself was to embrace a drug that would make me do no more than function, all for \$3,000 a month.

My doctors' assurance was that I would get well. I would be able to get a job with benefits that would allow me to pay for insurance. Biomedical treatment operates on a capitalist understanding of time. Rather than embracing the regenerative powers of the body, the idea is to get back to work as quickly as possible. It is the body's radical autonomy that resists commodification. To spite our optimal productivity, it gets sick. Sickness can be masked and treated but the body responds nonetheless. It reacts. It may take longer to recover than is convenient to your boss. We do not have time to get you better. We have time to make you functional.

"You are too young to live like this!" became my well intentioned doctors' refrain. "What a shame! We can get you back to work! You should be out living your life!" And so, they perpetuated the supposed narrative of health and death: illness is something which comes late in life, right before the end. They acted as if I was experiencing an inconvenience. As if I wasn't living my life anyway. They didn't understand that this experience had stripped and shed a light on me, making it simply impossible to carry on as before. There was no return to "normal."

They often asked me about what I did *before* I became sick. As if *that* was me, and *this* a brief interlude of discomfort. In fact, most discussions in doctors' offices are about pain or discomfort. These are important issues. Proust wrote, "Illness is the doctor to whom we pay most heed; to kindness, to knowledge, we make promise only; pain we obey."

As my life came to be ruled by the sensation of pain, it became impossible to think about anything *except* the sensation of pain. But pain is only the partial story of the body, a symptom of an underlying problem, whether an injury or a systemic issue. Pain is the body calling out for your attention. I wanted to be healthy again, not simply living without pain. I wanted a medical practice that addresses the true health of the body.

I resisted starting Humira for this very reason. My doctor explained that the way to eliminate the pain and inflammation was to clamp down my overactive immune system. Doing this would prevent it from attacking my joints and my intestines, leaving me pain-free. But it didn't take care of the underlying problem: my immune system is confused. Eliminating my immune system sounded like a bad—an incomplete—idea.

Most of my friends and family urged me to take what was offered. Even the people that I'd identified or had self-identified as radical or left leaning were suspiciously unsuspecting of the biomedical industrial complex: that every other industrial complex demanded rigorous scrutiny, but in matters of health and the body, medicine was unmarked and depoliticized.

Here I was in the hospital, having my body completely compartmentalized — treated not as a living organism but as an alienated collection of symptoms. What I realized through these visits, and my increased aversion to biomedical intervention (even while it was keeping me alive) was a resistance to a cyborgian present. I was in a futuristic nightmare, watching my body change and having no control over it; getting post-industrial noise MRIs; having a blood transfusion and feeling two pints of someone else's cold blood course through my veins; getting a colonoscopy, where I was knocked out and a fiberoptic camera was stuck up my ass and through my intestines. I asked for a copy of the video, a request they did not take seriously, nor find humorous.

I am not a neoLuddite. I am wholly indebted to modern science and technology for keeping me alive and in little pain. I believe in the specificity of cases. Sometimes biomedical treatment is inevitable and sometimes it is not, but I find expressions of body purity problematic. Our bodies are not discrete entities. They constantly interface with organisms and substances in our environment. Body modification and augmentation is an age old human practice. We have always been cyborgs.

Intellectually, I embrace the idea of being a cyborg, but in the midst of my health crisis I became opposed to this new identification. Faced with feeling less and less human, I clung to a particular idea of humanity denied through current medical practices. My symptoms also made me feel human, in a particularly disagreeable way.

The primary, most easily identifiable symptom of Crohn's disease is diarrhea. In my worst flares, I would shit upwards of thirty times a day. I sacrificed entire days to incessant shitting. I was forced into more intimate relations with my body—relations that underscored my lack of control, thus my lack of civility, and ultimately my body's radical realness. Nothing killed my ego more quickly than being an adult and having people I don't know (nurses) or people I know well (my father) take away my bedpan and wipe my ass.

I'm nowhere near the first person to take shit seriously. Scholar Cindy LaCom cites the theoretical underpinnings of our shit-averse culture in "Filthy Bodies, Porous Boundaries: The Politics of Shit in Disability Studies": Lacan suggested that the only thing distinguishing humans from animals is that we are ashamed by our shit. In "The Power of Horror," Kristeva writes, "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death." Shit reminds us of the fact that we shit, that we are in part biological process, not just social relations. Bataille saw the liberatory potential of human excrement and all the abject substances humans expulse in order to live.

IRA political prisoners in Northern Ireland during the "No Wash" protests of the '70s and '80s put this strain of thought into practice by refusing to wash. They shit, pissed,

and vomited all over their cells. Women stopped using menstrual paraphernalia. They stopped performing social order and stopped conducting their bodies as expected.

We police our own bodies for the greater social order in a variety of ways. Only clean, sanitized bodies are allowed to participate. There were many things that I was unable to do while I was sick. For a whole year, I fucked no one. There were some technical issues, but that doesn't mean I didn't want to. I had the stamina of someone on her deathbed, but beyond that, to be sick and to desire is a faux pas. My doctors were anxious for me to get back to work, but some human activities were never discussed. Sexuality is the right of those designated as "healthy" in our culture. A quick scan of contemporary popular culture suggests that aside from the most able-bodied (white, straight, cis-bodied, and of means), it is repulsive and "unnatural" for the sick, the disabled, or the elderly to talk about or openly engage in sexual conduct.

The abject body aside, it is difficult to conceptualize the body in general under the current cult of health. Descartes discusses the body in mechanical terms. Sontag notes the metaphor of the body "as a factory, an image of the body's functioning under the sign of health." What happens when our bodies "revolt" and the factories stop functioning so smoothly? Perhaps they are trying to tell us something about their working conditions.

We are at a point at which the highly efficient mechanization of the body of the factory worker under capitalism has given way to the virtualization of our labor through the Internet (and through the extraction of our labor from other places).

The advent of the smartphone has usurped leisure time from the working able-bodied. According to the Critical Art Ensemble, a tactical media collective, people with smartphones are cyborgs who can be accessed at all times as autonomous 24-hour workstations. We've moved from a system based on the production and consumption of goods to a mystical finance capitalism. The increased virtuality of labor, not unlike the administering of biomedical technology, is meant to make life more convenient. Increased ease of life is the ideal that we assume technology fulfills. And yet as advanced capitalism has deemed the physical body an obsolete, outdated tool, the body still remains. It continues to fail under capitalist conditions and gets pathologized as illness. The body is another inconvenience that must be enhanced and optimized.

As our society views itself as approaching pure rationality, our bodies become subject to utilitarianism. In "Flesh Machine," Critical Art Ensemble writes, "[The body] will be made to function instrumentally so that it may better fulfill the imperatives of pan-capitalism...physical perfection will be defined by an individual's ability to separate he/rself from nonrational motivation and emergent desires, thus increasing he/r potential devotion to varieties of political-economic service." Capitalism objectifies the body. It views the body as an exploitable resource and attempts to render it

indestructible and unstoppable with the aid of technology. Nothing is sacred; all is fair in the service of capital. In the U.S., there are no limitations on hours clocked in, and there are no mandates for employers to provide sick days to their employees. The body's natural weaknesses and limitations are ignored. I'm hesitant to take an evolutionary approach, but our bodies have not changed for hundreds of thousands of years.

What we do with them is radically different from our humble beginnings. I'm primarily concerned with whether these technologically engaged practices lead us toward increased autonomy or increased subservience. Health and wellness become an ideological tool deployed to normalize the body in the interests of capitalist production. This is made all the more effective and complicated because wellbeing is naturally desired by the patient and can be administered through self care. The paradox is that I want to feel better more than anything else.

I've been sick and unemployed for what feels like a long time. Before I became sick, I was fairly industrious. In college, I produced cultural events and lectures, I started clubs, I negotiated with the school administration, I took five to six classes per semester. I often did more than was expected of me and I spread myself thin. I went from incredible levels of productivity to spending most of my time alternately convalescing in a bed or puking in a toilet. I was chronically fatigued; getting dressed in the morning required a gargantuan effort. And on some days, holding a book or feeding myself was exhausting. Expectedly, I developed feelings of guilt over my inability to be a productive member of society: moralizing my disability as sloth, viewing my body's natural limitations as personal failure. I was anxious to get back to work. I still occasionally have these feelings of anxiety, but for the most part they have subsided. After my fourth flare, I gave up on the idea of being employed for a while, accepted that it wasn't a viable option for me. The pace of my life slowed down. I stopped multitasking. I became more forgiving with myself. I realized that there was nothing wrong with me.

A German activist group called the Socialist Patients' Collective (SPK) addresses the internalized desire to work by casting the relationship between patients and doctors in a Marxist framework. For the SPK, everyone is sick under capitalism. For some, their bodies make them more aware of this. The SPK was formed in 1970 and existed for about a year. Before their dissolution, they managed to put out some fiery propaganda. Their slogan was, "Turn your illness into a weapon." They also wrote, "Sickness is the condition and result of capitalism." As a perpetual patient, this rhetoric is refreshing. The chronically ill are often cast as victims of fate or genetics. Rarely are we politicized or allowed to relate our personal experiences to larger social or cultural phenomena. As far as doctors are concerned, our diseases are empirical facts and not much else.

Following the logic of SPK, being ill appears to be a de facto resistance to the established social order, to capitalist production and subsequently to the engendering of material relations between humans. Disease necessitates unemployment and unemployment is a social disease. When we are sick, we enact unintended resistance to an economic system that privileges efficiency over resilience.

Of course, illness predates capitalism, but the physical impairments that make the condition of wage dependence unlivable were not always disabling. The social model of disability maintains a clear distinction between disability and impairment. Impairment is an illness, injury, or congenital condition that causes loss of ability or partial ability to function. Disability, in contrast, signifies a particular relationship to one's environment. Disability is the reflection of barriers that prevent people with impairments from participating in society. For example, when I have difficulty walking, it is a physical impairment. I am disabled not by my physical impairment, but by the fact that many buildings don't have ramps or elevators. Capitalism is an economic system that assesses bodies in terms of labor power, designating certain bodies as useful and others as not. Physical or mental impairment as an excuse for exclusion from social or economic life is endlessly reinforced under this system.

So what does this resistance by way of illness look like? Sometimes it looks like leisure. Ah yes, leisure: the time we have when we are not at work, the time that we own. According to the Situationists, leisure is a cruel trick: it's our precious time sold back to us as a commodity.

After my many hospitalizations, there was always a period of convalescence. Convalescence is a bourgeois activity much like leisure. Sontag writes, "The Romantics invented Invalidism as a pretext for leisure, and for dismissing bourgeois obligations in order to live for one's art. It was a way of retiring from the world without having to take responsibility for the decision." I was at times grateful for catching a break from my own high standards for myself. I imagined myself a nineteenth century waif relaxing in a Swiss sanatorium. I was able to convalesce for many reasons, including the fact that I lived at home and was financially supported by my mother.

Under the Affordable Care Act, I am covered under her insurance plan for six more months.

I am blessed. I live in a country where I have access to medical care, albeit at great cost. When I was first hospitalized in the States, I stayed for five days and left with a \$52,000 bill—most of which was covered by my insurance. In France, I was hospitalized for three weeks and left with only a bill for the television in my hospital room. Everyone is minimally covered in France, yet as a low income resident I qualified for 100 percent coverage.

I suffer from a disease that is not stigmatized or associated with so-called deviant or immoral behavior, unlike people with HIV or hepatitis. I am allowed to be a victim and no one assumes that I got what I deserved. While I was sick, my time was not economically exploitable in the Marxist sense. I could not contribute to the work force. What happens when time is not money? I spent a whole year mostly lying in a bed producing nothing; extremely bored.

Maintaining remission and taking care of myself required a lot of my time. In order to justify my unemployment, I still thought in capitalist time designations, and would tell people that taking care of myself was a “full time job.” If I was not seeing a specialist, getting medical tests, or in physical therapy, I spent most of my time on the Internet, probably as bored as you were at work. For many chronically ill and disabled people, the Internet is an invaluable social space. I was bed-bound and it became my life. Nerds have lived in virtual lives since the advent of virtuality, but for those of us whose physical bodies can seem like a burden or an ontological prison, the Internet functions as a utopia of sorts.

No one knew I was sick. My Facebook presented an able bodied version of myself stagnant for many months. On the net, my healthy self was frozen in poses of youthful exuberance, running around the city of Paris, wining and dining. Really, I was immobile in my mother’s one-bedroom apartment in Philadelphia, at times in a wheelchair, at times needing assistance for basic activities like brushing my teeth or holding a glass of water. To this day I have very few images of this period of my life. The day a friend decided to post a picture of me using my cane was a big day for me.

Over the months I have become more stable. I reluctantly started Humira, the drug that I had avoided for over a year. I told my doctors that I wanted to try to heal myself holistically and they skeptically agreed to monitor me while I took myself off of the steroids that had gotten me out of the previous flare. My gastroenterologist told me that I wouldn’t last a week without my medication. I adopted a raw diet, exercised regularly, slept a lot, meditated daily, went to acupuncture, and went to psychotherapy. I took no pills, except for some vitamins that I had been deficient in, and I lasted two months, to the surprise of my doctors. Then everything started to go downhill again.

I remained in this cycle of watching my health deteriorate rapidly, followed by long months of recovery. The minute I felt well again, I would start flaring and the cycle would continue. After the last course of steroids, I decided to go with Humira for some more stability. I was desperate for relief. It’s too early to tell, but I think it is helping make the day-to-day more manageable.

I’m trying to accept this as the step I had to take, while still hoping for a less detrimental option in the future.

I'm still highly suspicious of the biomedical industrial complex. Over the past few years, I have found myself completely and inextricably tied to this world in a way that I didn't want to be. I desire an alternative and I still believe that one day I won't need this medication to live. Yet, currently, I'm fully dependent on Humira for my functionality. It is difficult to conceive of resistance to something that I need right now. The current battle is to not let ideological extremes play out on a mental or physical level. I have a tendency to think it is all-or-nothing with my health. If I'm pumped full of toxic drugs, I can eat crap all day, never exercise or sleep, start smoking and drinking again. If I'm off of medication, I have to eat clean, exercise daily, and sleep a minimum of eight hours per night. Definitely no drugs or alcohol. For the moment, I'm trying to find a middle ground that means taking my medication diligently, taking care of myself, and allowing for vice in moderation.

I left my mother's place and have been living in New York City for a month now. I am on the hunt for work and an apartment, much like the quarter million people who move here every year. For everyone hustling in this metropolis, it can be quite stressful. I try to stay calm and not worry about the two year gap on my resume. I've dealt with worse things.

In college, I used to work my body to the bone, swallowing fistfuls of amphetamines to get as much done as possible. I can't handle that anymore. I still struggle with deadlines, but I refuse to make them at the expense of my body. My body has aged considerably. I need those eight hours of sleep. I need nutrients.

When I first started dating my current partner, they asked me, "What is it that you want?" I said, "To be happy and healthy."

"That's what old people want."

I said, "I've been through some things that old people go through." My experience has made me less invested in notions of success and more invested in notions of happiness.

At the risk of sounding condescending and corny, I will say that I feel simultaneously late in the game and over the game. I have no idea what it's like to work fulltime, in the same place, for over a year. I'm 25, so not having that experience makes me feel left behind. Yet sometimes, my peers' office concerns seem as absurd as a Dilbert comic strip. Unlike my oversubscribed friends, I'm learning how to say "no," and I refuse to overbook myself.

Since we associate illness with old age, it's no surprise that we view the elderly as the ultimate refuse of our capitalist system. Just look at how we treat them. I still don't have

the wisdom of an old person. Despite my wariness towards my doctors' capitalist urgings, I crave normalcy. I can't wait to get back to work. I'm at a place in my life where I'm trying to find out whether I am capable of making a living on my own or whether I need to take my social security appeal more seriously. In all of this uncertainty, all I can do is try to be my own advocate and remain medically informed.

My hair and bones have thinned from previous medications. I still have trouble with stairs. I'm still exhausted. I've been diagnosed with a third autoimmune condition, Graves' disease. Now I get to see three different specialists. I know that the rest of my life might be spent mitigating side effects. But already there have been improvements: I've gained the weight back. I only shit once or twice a day. I can walk for longer than two minutes without being in pain. I'm learning to navigate this disease, anticipating flares before they spiral out of control. I try to remain in the present. My next flare may come in six days, six weeks, six months, six years—or never.

This condition of existence requires an openness to the ebb and flow of things, an understanding that everything changes—for better or worse.

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REFLECTIONS OF A HOMEOWNERSEXUAL: BUYING AND SELLING A HOUSE WITH ANTI-CAPITALIST INTENTIONS - Ezra Berkley Nepon, 2008 *with a new preface from 2024*

Preface

Almost 25 years after the events of this piece, the possibility of buying a house in good shape for so little money feels like a chapter from a distant history book. So many of the options in this story hinged on the very small scale of the costs. Still, I've heard from many people over the years that the piece offered a useful prompt to consider a range of possible choices beyond what seemed to be assumed in the process of buying and selling a home. I hope this reflection continues to be useful both in documenting a different moment in time and possibility, and sparking ways to think creatively about buying and selling a home.

BUYING

In 2001 I bought a house in Philadelphia in partnership with a close friend for \$25,000. The three story, five-bedroom house was in good shape. We made the purchase in cash, through a personal loan from my friend's grandparents with a relatively low interest rate of 7%. We collected a total of \$625/month for the combined "rent" among all of the housemates (including ourselves), which paid the "mortgage" and monthly bills with a little left over for home repair savings.

We and our various housemates were all white and flamboyantly gendered queers moving into a working poor Black neighborhood. We bought the house because we knew the only white people in the neighborhood, a couple with strong relationships throughout the block. Though we eventually also built relationships with many of our immediate neighbors, we often felt open hostility from people in the surrounding blocks – and we knew that it was a response to the real threats of impending displacement that our presence suggested.

Looking back, if I had it to do over again, I would not move there. I have more experience and language for understanding gentrification now, but I don't have better answers to how we could have done it more "right."

We had anti-capitalist intentions, but we were hazy on the strategy. We were clear that we wouldn't sell the house for a profit, and definitely never to a developer. But we didn't

really imagine selling the house, so we never got very concrete about those conditions and never put anything in writing. That made things a lot harder when we faced the reality of actually selling the house in a capitalist system. Perhaps my strongest advice is to make and document decisions about how selling will be done during the early stages of a homebuying process, while relationships between co-owners are strong, healthy, and optimistic.

We intended to live in this home for a very long time. We planned to take an old house and restore it. We wanted to create a refuge that felt safe and comfortable for our queer community. We didn't want to pay rent to a shady landlord. We dreamed about the projects we would start once the house was paid off, like solar panels and roof decks for gardens.

All of the people who lived in the house also worked on home repair projects, and there was an explicit agreement that working on the house and paying "rent" were both investments. In this model, the house's "worth" belonged to all who invested in it, and if the house was never sold that investment would be a more philosophical one, a gift of community-building for future inhabitants.

We were transparent about how we paid the "mortgage" and bills. There was a power-imbalance in the reality that two of us technically owned the house, and that power did matter, but as much as possible we tried for horizontal shared decision-making. Housemates reflected that it was meaningful to know that they were not just paying rent in our house, and to feel that it was collectively owned.

SELLING

About five years later, the house was paid off but the relationships of the group living in the house had dramatically changed. Our lives were shifting in ways that didn't make group living/homeownership a functional option. After lots of heartbreak, those of us still living in the house decided to sell it.

We briefly considered land-trusting the house (a commonly used model of collective housing in Philadelphia) but didn't pursue that option because land trusts permanently end the financial asset of owning a home and I wanted the option of putting the house up for bail or selling it to raise funds in the case of an emergency. The context of the time was key for this concern: we bought the house right after the traumatizing Philadelphia Republican National Convention protests of 2000, where many were kept in jail with bails set as high as \$1 million. In the aftermath, legal expenses cost tens of thousands for some individuals who were targeted by the Philly police for their political organizing, charged with layers of felonies and facing massive repression. A week after buying the house in 2001, I had put it up as collateral to bail a friend out of jail.

We envisioned our ideal situation for selling the house that could be some kind of harm reduction for the ways our own presence had often felt like a threat to our neighbors. These criteria were partly about hoping that the house wouldn't be flipped or lost to developers through our sale. We also made a commitment to each other that we would not sell the house through word of mouth in our white subculture.

We put out word about our house to people on our block and through an organization of African-American anti-gentrification activists in a nearby neighborhood. That organization was how we connected with the buyers.

There were lots of other external pressures confusing me about how to sell the house in an ethical but not white-guilt-stupid way. Lots of people told me we were making a mistake by selling the house for too little money right before impending gentrification due to a new fancy charter school in the neighborhood. And, as we were deciding to sell the house, I witnessed a drive-by shooting murder on our block. Afterwards, I was anxious that people would think we were white-fighting to a "safer" neighborhood.

In the end, it turned out that our neighbors mostly didn't care if or why we moved. I was wrapped up in what we now might call "main character syndrome."

We tried to be as careful as possible about where we put money in this process. We didn't work with a realtor, and we used a lawyer recommended by the network that we connected with to spread word about the house. We didn't originally get the house appraised. Instead, I looked at online house sale records from city hall for my block and came up with \$60,000 as a number that seemed in line with recent sale prices and considering the home improvements we had made. The buyers counter-offered to buy the home for \$45k. We struggled with confusion about what was fair. We had recently discovered that the oil tank was leaking – a big problem that we had told the buyers about but did not plan to fix before the sale. We also believed that selling too low could negatively impact other neighbors' property values. So, we got the house appraised and even with knowledge of the leaking oil tank, the appraisal came in at \$65k. My co-owner and I agreed that our initial offer was a fair price, said it was final, and the buyers agreed to the purchase.

The final housemate group decided to donate \$10,000 of that sale price to a number of local housing justice/anti-gentrification groups and to split the rest of the money between the 7 people who had lived in the house for six months or more, pro-rated by number of months each had paid into the house. In this arrangement, we each got back about 75% of the money we had paid in, with a letter to each person who was getting money explaining how we sold the house and how the money was divided.

We made donations anonymously through Bread and Roses Community Fund, with specific organization and grant amounts advised by a local anti-gentrification organizer.

An announcement by the Fund about these grants from the sale of a house prompted a large number of donations in response!

Questions for Potential Homeowners

Since initially publishing this article, I've often thought about how the super-low cost of our home—\$25,000—was key to our ability to be creative, flexible, even experimental in our process of buying, living in, and selling the house. Although the specifics of this story won't easily apply to most homeownership situations, the experience raised a number of financial and ethical issues that I encourage people to consider when buying or selling a house, in whatever ways they can integrate into your own process.

- **Where is your money going?** Are there ways to fund social justice movements/aligned individuals with the big chunks of money that go to lawyers, realtors, contractors, moving companies?
- **Who are you asking for input or advice about this process?** Can you connect with groups or organizers in your neighborhood or city, informing your choices beyond your own perspectives? Is anyone challenging you?
- **Who understands and shares your political commitments?** If you diverge from the primary goal of accumulating wealth, many voices will tell you that you are making mistakes. Even if you feel sure of your position, it helps to have supportive allies.
- **Can you buy or sell through word of mouth** rather than paying a realtor, and that way keep the sale price lower and the process less commercial?
- **How do you choose your lawyer** for the final sale paperwork? Do you need a lawyer?
- **How will your sale price impact the homeowners and renters in your neighborhood?**
- **Are you making a profit? What happens to that money?** How much money did you put into the house? How much do you “need” or “deserve” to keep? Can you direct any percentage of those funds into movements for housing justice or other liberation movements?
- **If you do keep some money from the sale of your home, where does that money live?** What are your harm reduction options for banking or investing? Under what circumstances would you be willing to spend it or give it away?

THE HOUSE OF 2704: FAMILY-STYLE LIVING - Queers of 2704, 2012

Between May 2006 and August 2010, a peculiar sort of amorous endeavor took shape in the Mission District of San Francisco. An urban, modern-day “commune” existed where the residents shared everything. Literally, everything! Beds, meals, showers, relations, rooms, material items, experiences, love, food, closets, friends, politics, projects and dreams – but not underwear drawers.

“We were queer, poly, and kinky. We were young and hot, we were wild and crazy – in the good and hard ways. We were political, we were lovers, we were sister-brother, we were each other. We were 2704. At one time – that qnoc house – it was awesome, and like all good things, it ended.”

The following is a brief, retrospective account of our times as a “commune” – a word others often used to describe our living arrangement. We write to share our version of making queer homo love because this undertaking has furthered our individual and collective healing from the alienation and dehumanization, those toxic by-products of the current exploitative economic system and present legacies of Empire and colonization.

Capitalism is an economic system that bases itself upon power-over relations of domination and habituates us to complicity with the system in our most intimate settings – reproducing within ourselves a mind-over-everything mentality; over-body, -heart, -will, -speech, -desire. These dynamics influence how we relate to everyone and everything around us. It felt good to build our home as a refuge from the hierarchical, rigid world we experienced in our daily lives.

Butch(er) Paper Beginnings

In early 2006 over a shared meal, six people explored our desire to live in the expensive city of San Francisco, California. We were in our early 20s (20-25), some of us were students, some of us had full-time jobs; some of us were queer-identified, anti-authoritarian; all but one of us identified as people of color. Some of us were already related to one another as friends, lovers, and siblings; some of us were beginning our relationship as housemates, though we had known of each other through extended networks. Some of us were already living in SF, some of us were not.

In that first meeting we set intentions, discussed our financial limitations which raised questions about what may be possible. We figured that between the six of us, we could afford a place in the range of \$400-500 each for rent (\$2400-3000/month) and hoped

against all odds to stay (for those of us already in SF) in the Mission District. If rent seems high, it's because it was – San Francisco had and continues to have some of the highest rents in the country. A quick online housing search revealed that there were some options in that price range available, however, the best options turned up four-bedroom houses and apartments only. There were no 6-bedroom rentals in our price range.

How would we share 4-bedrooms among six of us? We didn't want to reproduce what we'd seen with shared housing in the city – a house full of individual bedrooms that were private havens unto themselves, with refrigerators and cupboards cut up into sections that divided deliciousness by resident, and with very little (if any) common space. We wanted to have more rather than less, and together we had lots of everything to share. Most of us had previous experience in sharing housing; whether in college or growing up, many of us had shared living quarters with people beyond the hypothetical nuclear family – though, that could hardly prepare us for the living arrangements we were about to envision for ourselves.

Somehow from our collective brain we came up with the idea of putting a bed – or two – in every room to ensure everyone had a sleeping space. Instead of assigning people to individual bedrooms, we agreed to assign themes to each room and distribute our possessions throughout the house based on the ideal purpose of the room. We envisioned having a reading room, a media room, a music room, an office, a lounge, a dining room (no bed), kitchen (no bed). Our thinking was that in the day-time, those rooms would function as common space and in the evening, turn into bedrooms. We envisioned sleeping in the room that suited us that night, with each of us doing our best at rotating rooms and requesting them for “special” time (for example: sexy, sickness, and/or study time).

The commitment to make the spaces dual-purposed, meant a collective willingness to pick up after ourselves, so that the space could serve its dual purpose. The commitment to assigning themes to each room meant a willingness to figure out sleeping arrangements every night and to make all the sleeping spaces desirable – since you may end up there for the night. Yes, it was an intimate proposal from the start! This was not like anything any of us had ever done before, but somehow, we thought it was possible – it looked doable on the butcher paper we'd mapped out for ourselves. Instead of having one bedroom and maybe a dining room to share, we gave ourselves five open rooms to exist within and share. It just made sense to us at the time, so we decided to go for it.

[see diagram of our house, with names of rooms, at the end of this article]

We moved our boxes and visions into our home on May 1st, 2006, and set about making our intentions a reality. Many of our friends, while curious, were waiting for the

other shoe to drop, for our “experiment” to implode. As the house began to take shape, and the months turned to years, the doubts and mockery shifted to hope and appreciation for the home we shared with each other and our network of friends and loved ones. We had an open (unlocked) door policy until we disbanded in September 2010. Literally, we kept the door unlocked day-after-day, in case a weary soul just needed a place to rest.

We wanted our loved ones to have a place to stop in for a friendly chat, to use the bathroom or drink some water, get a snack or have a smoke, share a song, laugh, or dance. We wanted to offer a safe(r) space from what we felt was/is the madness of the world outside of our door, the lived ‘isms’ we experienced and resisted every day. It was the world we wanted to live, so we made it so. And yes, that did mean that two strangers, and even a disgruntled lover, came into our home unwelcomed, and for a few weeks following those separate incidents, we all had to reflect and reconsider our open-door policy. After the feelings of violation subsided, we found ourselves recommitted to leaving the door open once more.

“I could never do that!”

Of the original six founding members of the house, three of us were siblings, one of those siblings was partnered with another housemate, and the last two were friends with both of the partnered housemates. This formation didn’t hold for long, and during the four years we operated as a “commune” we had about seven additional residents join us, sometimes filling vacancies and at other times increasing our numbers. We maxed out our occupancy at nine residents and a small dog, and on the other end we dwindled down to five.

Some have speculated that the pre-existing relationships are what made the house work. Others viewed it as further proof of the *exceptionalism* of our character – since in their own estimation, those types of pre-existing relations would make it even more difficult to share such intimate arrangements. What stands out to us as a more relevant factor is that we made a commitment to make a home with one another – and for us, that meant a commitment to *figure it out together*.

It was a haphazard first few months: the contents of our future shared closet were at the time in black garbage bags on the floor and a household budget was non-existent. Housemates took individual initiative to bring into our home needed food and furniture, cooking, cleaning and giving order to our many varied possessions – all while continuing with school and/or work.

In the following months, we designed and built the shelving inside the Get-Ready Room – the house’s smallest room turned walk-in closet. We integrated and organized all our clothes by type of clothing, though we always retained separate underwear

drawers. As we integrated and distributed our possessions throughout the house, we did so with the idea that everything would have a place and so could be put away, including a single, “private” drawer in a tall bureau for those things that were yours that one needed to keep separately. We also lofted a couple of the beds in the different rooms to make more space.

One housemate encouraged us to keep track of who paid for what and when, and as we continued to live together these details were shaped into a budget proposal. The proposal of \$700/month was inclusive of rent (\$2600), trash (\$25), internet (\$75), groceries & bulk (\$700), laundry (\$100), cannabis (\$300), household items (\$100), car expenses (\$200) and party supplies (\$100) – all items we deemed essential for our child-less household of fairly able-bodied, 20-something year olds! That meant on average, we each were paying \$435 per month to live in one of the most expensive cities in the country – and with an additional \$275 for a shared board bill, we were living more comfortably on less than if we weren’t sharing resources in this way.

Over time, we agreed that groceries meant no ready-made-food, but ingredients of all sorts. The proposal was adopted over dinner as a monthly guideline for how we’d spend our shared money. Two other housemates went to our local credit union and set up an account with all of our names on it. With that everyone in the house was enabled to make financial decisions on an as needed basis and ideally within the guidelines we’d suggested for ourselves. In practice, that’s what happened.

In retrospect, we realize there was indeed a lot of trust and generosity of spirit, because we failed often at simple things like feeding ourselves well, especially in the beginning. Being stubborn anti-authoritarians, no one wanted a chore wheel – and so we never had one; we even refused to have an assigned cook night. In this way, we tried to make room for us to contribute individually as we felt moved to do so – and as we contributed, we were given feedback about our contributions in real-time:

“Oh, that’s too spicy for me!” “And they don’t eat soy.”

“I really like this sweater, so if you’re going to wear it, it goes in the delicate wash.”

“The cast-iron pan is never washed with soap.”

And as we didn’t mind each other, we were also given feedback:

“I just cleaned up that room, ‘cause I’m having someone over.”

“I made dinner last night, and am not putting away leftovers y’all!”

“You can’t park the car in the driveway!”

“Why are you screaming?”

“I was in the middle of something, not now.”

Not having assigned tasks did mean that, at different times, some people contributed “more” than others. Our general sentiment was that this was okay because we understood life threw challenges and excitement at us at different times, and so at other times those same people perhaps may contribute “less”. Sometimes we called our home a “do-ocracy”, do what you see was necessary. Some people really liked cooking, and did lots of it. Some preferred to keep bathrooms clean, others the floor and other people really prioritized laundry or taking out the trash, compost and recycling.

We were all really good scavengers also, and through the students, worksites and our neighborhoods – we regularly stocked up on food and other essentials after events, rummaging through free boxes, garbage bins and finding things on the streets. For one housemate’s graduation, we – as blood and chosen family! – hit the dumpsters in between ceremony and reception. A shopping trip to the store may simply be for the things one needed or one could let others know and pick up items for people. We bought certain things in bulk to save money, namely toilet paper, paper towels and detergent.

As we continued to get to know each other, our rhythms, likes and dislikes – from food allergies and preferences, pet peeves, bathroom habits, hobbies, style of communicating, etc. – we would all help each other take note (in person, over phone, text or email). When the space felt consistently disheveled, we’d initiate the on-and-off again “Pick up after yourself!” campaign or schedule a day where we’d all collectively clean the house for a few hours. We were especially good at the collective clean in preparation for a party, which we hosted every couple of months. We managed to have very few scheduled meetings because we enjoyed spending time together and so, we shared ideas and feelings regularly – in person, over text, phone and email.

Money, growing and the politics of emotions

Figuring it out together meant we were committed to breaking down the barriers to talk openly about money. At 2704, we strove to be open with one another with what can sometimes feel like a loaded subject or a subject some of us had learned to keep private and secret. At times we adjusted if one of us was short, sometimes paying only the rent portion but not the board part of the monthly contribution – but this meant we had to be transparent about our financial situations and be willing to discuss our needs

and wants. Some of us adjusted our contributions because we had financial resources available to us by way of unexpected financial or material support from parents.

At times it went poorly. Like the time a housemate who asked to have their lover move in failed to disclose said lover would not be able to (or did not plan to) pay rent. This detail was made known only when this cisgender man was already en route from the UK. This felt manipulative to some, but we did our best to figure it out, and agreed that work could be done around the house in exchange for room and board. The work didn't materialize as discussed – probably because he was not involved in the discussion. It was a trying few months, and after a particularly difficult house meeting, they both moved out.

During that difficult house meeting, the housemate who brought in said lover, a woman of color, insisted that the lover was “unable [or unwilling] to pay rent because he hadn't paid rent in the squat he had lived in the UK”, and further he was “unauthorized to work in the country.” Tempers flared amongst some of the other residents, who loudly cried foul at the faulty reasoning that in essence burdened all of us with the upkeep of a white dude from Europe. Not all felt this way, noticeably the other cisgender men in the home, who said little during that meeting or after they moved out. The tensions lingered in the relations of those of us who remained.

Then there was the time later that year when a month-long guest turned into an 8-month “guest” who wouldn't leave and did not contribute as the housemate he'd informally become. This was a college friend of one of our housemates, and he spent his 8-month stay mostly playing guitar and doing drugs – neither things we begrudged him. Rather, the problem was that he did little in terms of contributing or building up the space. He seemed pretty unable or unwilling to integrate any feedback he got from us, and he eventually moved out on his own accord... though not before testing our willingness to let him stay without paying rent, because “he didn't have the money.” Luckily, he left soon thereafter. He was never welcomed back into the space and our concurrence of “good riddance!” seemed to bring those of us who remained closer together.

And sometimes it worked really well. Like when we moved in one housemate who was unable to pay the full rent right away because he would not be paid until after he had moved in. We happily fronted the money and he promptly repaid it, and eventually finished paying into the deposit. Or the time when one housemate's mom needed money for surgery, and we threw a party that raised a few hundred dollars to send to her. Or the time when we were beginning to plan our house “gaycation” since we had accumulated a good safety net, but instead forwent the fun to pay for an expensive house emergency. Or at times when some of us were tight one month, maybe we wouldn't pay all of the board bill ... the key was really communication, and our commitment to care for and believe in each other.

In retrospect, it's easier to be a little in awe of ourselves – we were so young, and some of us both so hurt and resilient, growing emotionally into magnificent people for whom we had no mold.

“Oh, you live in that queer commune!”

In mid-2008, with the departure of two founding cisgender male housemates, one of them white – the space became explicitly a queer people of color house. After two years of living together, and doing queer political organizing together, those of us who remained were better able to articulate why it was important to have a queer, POC-only space in our home. To be clear, the proposal was ‘queer’ from the start – in that it was an odd living arrangement, in that most of us had queer desires, identities and practices. And an intention for a safe(r) space for people of color was also there from the start. In fact, the decision to include the one white founding housemate was almost blocked by another founding housemate: “I’m not living with white people.” But then they met, and shared anti-authoritarian, anti-racist analysis and the block turned to a stand-aside.

Some readers may wonder, why is it important to have a queer, people of color space? For us as queer people of color, stepping out of our home to go to our workplaces, to most public spaces, to queer events, in San Francisco, meant we were often awash in a sea of heteronormativity and in many queer spaces, whiteness. As im/migrants, most of us were not too put off by the sense of not belonging to the outside world, we were quite practiced at it; but as im/migrants we also longed to belong, to feel at ease, and so we poured ourselves into our homo.

By this time, we had many sharing practices structured into our lives and ways of living that served us well in making our home feel supportive, beautiful, welcoming. At this time people’s responses to our home were gratitude, excitement and curiosity: “So this is what it would be like after the revolution!” exclaimed one guest. Friends and acquaintances responded with hope, appreciation, participation and contribution instead of skepticism. Together, we created fabulous parties like The Fall Menagerie Ball, A Lace & Leather Affair, Let Your Inner She-Wolf Out, Queer Wrestling Party... and oh, the outfits!!!

We also had many dinners, workshops, meetings, and work days. We fucked all over the house, with each other, with our friends, lovers and guests. We hosted many queers on the road from far and near, and we hosted some of our many blood relatives, too. We also dealt with and failed at effectively addressing difficult relationship dynamics between siblings, housemates and their respective lover(s), and between housemates. And then there were bedbugs.

All good things...

Being a sex-positive household that shared such intimate living arrangements meant we were used to discussing our health concerns with each other, whether it was a cold, scabies or our STIs – so we could take necessary precautions to stay as healthy and safe as we could. Bedbugs was a public health risk we knew we exposed ourselves to due to the large numbers of travelers we hosted, and when we began noticing bites we hoped against all odds that it was *aggressive spiders* – yeah, there’s no such thing. After a few weeks of collective denial, we finally found an actual bug and then tried all sorts of non-toxic solutions on our own, without success.

Prior to fumigation we had to rid ourselves of anything that could not be fumigated or washed and dried on hot settings, and wash and/or store the rest of our belongings. The coordination was an expensive, time-consuming, energy-draining ordeal and we felt fortunate that we had accumulated “savings” from the monthly surpluses of previous months to offset the cost of fumigation preparations (California law states the landowner must pay for the fumigation itself). Among the losses were many dearly-loved possessions, weeks of being unable to live in our home, and our savings that we were hoping to use for a house trip. And the point here again is that even when it was difficult, we did our best to figure it out together.

In the spring of 2010, 2704 was hit with another bout of bedbugs. So much more was lost – again! In its wake, two housemates announced their imminent and staggered departures. In August 2010, with three housemates down – one more backed out and in the following month, 2704 family-style living was over. It was a swift and sharp transition from five, dual-purpose rooms – a reading room, music room, a media room, an office, a lounge space – into a four-bedroom house, with a shared living room. The contrast was stark. 2704 remained a queer house for a couple of years, and finally shut its doors in August 2012.

What We’ve Taken With Us

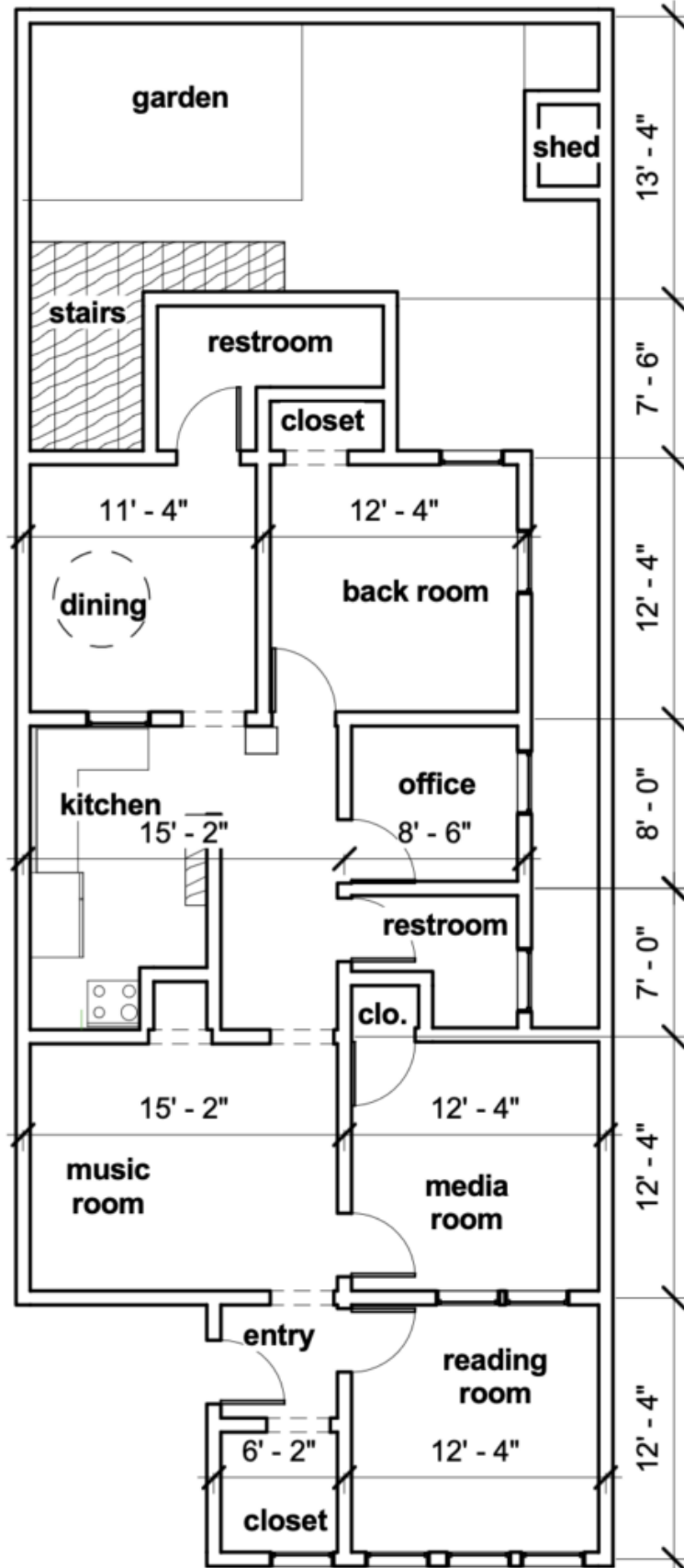
So was it just a phase? Well, yes, of course it was; and no, it wasn’t just a phase. We made different choices than most 20-somethings we knew about how we wanted to live and make our home. Like our queerness, it was and is hard for some people in our lives to respect our choices to be as we want to be, not as we are expected to be. Choosing to live out our resistance to capitalism via our practice of autonomy and interdependence at 2704 demanded a healthy dose of self-responsibility from all of us. And we were rewarded with material resources and emotional experiences that could have only arisen from sharing the intimacies of our lives.

Looking back, it’s easy to see how we all were challenged to grow emotionally and politically. The challenges we faced and mistakes we made were integral to our

learning. If we had to do it over, we'd do it again – and we'd pay more attention to strengthening the emotional infrastructure needed for such a project. Some of us have dreamt of sharing a household with children, a home that can welcome our elders, a space where we can age meaningfully with all of our loved ones... but for now, we've yet to pull out the butcher paper.

See a drawing of a map of the house below.

Li Morales and tootles Lee are sister-brothers of womb and fierce co-conspirators in life. They worked on this piece while in dialogue with, and with input from former, current and future housemates – Vivian, Abel Diego and Essex. We're most titillated by our guest who observed that "if you weren't queer before you walked in, you certainly left a little bit queer after." We are forever grateful to all of you who have made and continue to make queer homo love real in this lifetime – thank you



PARENTING AND RESISTING CAPITALISM: CREATING A NEW NARRATIVE - Terri Nilliasca, 2012 with an updated preface from 2023

10 years later:

As any parent will tell you, the days are long but the years are short. Ten years ago, our children were 9 years old. When I wrote the essay below, we were still holding hands, helping with bath time, and answering innumerable questions about the world. Now they are young adults, nineteen, and in their second semester of college. Parenting teenagers through late-stage capitalism, looming climate catastrophe, and a global shut down caused by a life-threatening pandemic, is challenging, terrifying, heartbreaking and joy filled all at the same time. Parenting teenagers taught me so many additional lessons in the stories we must tell each other to resist capitalism. Also, watching my children start to incorporate their own narratives gives me insights if our anti-capitalist framework had any impact. When we text a picture of ourselves at a Palestine march and a child replies “From the River to the Sea” or our other child explains why they identify as non-binary, we hear our words but also their new narratives. Re-reading the essay below, I decided to leave it mostly untouched, written for the parenting of young children to resist capitalism, but I did add one of the most profound lessons I learned from our teenage children at the end.

Parenting and Resisting Capitalism: Creating A New Narrative

As parents, we are usually the first people to explain to our children the world around them. Of course, they are also independently seeing, observing, and creating narrative, but we help shape and build that narrative. We are often the first ones to answer fundamental questions about why the world is the way it is. We explain what is “normal” and what is not. We draw the lines into the broad expanse of color and light that is the world. We provide the first rough sketch, the first set of bones, the nuts and bolts to our children’s internally created world. It is a daunting and scary responsibility but also the place where we can really make a difference in giving our children a counter-narrative to the capitalist mythologies that surrounds us.

So much of our parenting to resist capitalism lies in where and how we draw those lines or how well we can explain that these lines are not immutable. Can we even acknowledge that we are the creators of those lines and boundaries so that our children understand that they have the power to change them themselves? Do we explain that these lines can be erased, that we can choose to live outside the borders and in opposition to the laws that our society has created to reinforce our boundaries and borders? In some cases, it is making the invisible visible, like revealing that workers’

hands touched and made everything we use, or erasing the false line between citizen and immigrant or between 1st world and 3rd world.

If our narrative is like the skeleton of our world, in our family we try to give our children a new set of bones with which to play and build. In this essay, I explore the challenges and dilemmas that we face as parents trying to help our children resist capitalism. We want our children to envision a different possibility in the ways humans relate, produce, and build community together. We hope that these new stories or perspectives will help them be part of future resistance. Capitalism and the system that keeps it in place is a deeply complex set of norms, values, and economic orderings. We seek to give our children the tools to see capitalism for what it is and then to resist it.

We are not alone in this quest. We are very lucky to have fabulous chosen family who are struggling to be radical, queer, conscious, anti-capitalist parents/aunts/uncles/goddess mothers. We talk, we share resources, and we commiserate. We absolutely need each other – where else can we discuss what works, what doesn't work, and the different choices that we make? The various strategies that I offer below emerge from our collective attempt to raise our children in this monstrous, killing, capitalist system of the United States.

We pool and share our resources with chosen and blood family.

The small, individualized nuclear family is a bedrock of capitalism. This tiny unit lives or dies alone. It creates tremendous pressure on the two parents who must somehow earn enough money to feed, clothe, and educate their offspring. In a heterosexual relationship, inevitably the bulk of the child-care and unpaid work of keeping the house together falls on the woman, even if she works for wages outside the home. In a neo-liberal economy, this reproduction of labor, the raising of new workers, childcare and education is a “private” problem, to be solved one family at a time, with the state bearing no responsibility. Family resources become something to hoard and guard, lest other people “steal” them.

We are lucky to find people with whom we can live cooperatively; we struggled with isolation when we first became parents. I felt incredibly lonely as the person responsible for much of the childcare and domestic work.

Now, we live in a communal way with seven of us in our home. My partner, our two children, and I share a home with my aunt and her daughter and grandson. We all contribute to the household differently. My partner and I are currently the only wage earners, so we shoulder the expenses, while my Aunt does the bulk of domestic work. My cousin is a college student, so she mostly studies. In some ways, you could argue that this is not resisting capitalism at all, because we have two wage earners and one person who stays home and does the household work. I think the difference is in

the distribution of status and power in the household. We don't consider earning wages to make one's contribution to the household to be more valuable than other "unpaid" contributions. In addition, we always have a steady stream of loved ones who stay with us from time to time, sometimes for two years, sometimes for a month. We treat them all, blood or chosen, as family.

We strive to not enforce the idea of private property for our children. We teach all the children that all toys belong to everyone, except for their special stuffed animal companions (aka "loveys") or projects that are still in progress. But even the most fantastic Lego creation goes back into the communal soup for sharing after some time has passed.

All items of value are recycled, either given to the next person who can use it in the house or sent to our family in the Philippines. This is presented not as charity, but rather as obligation to the members of our human family.

Retelling the America Creation Myth – We Tell Our Children “This Land Was Stolen”

Language is indispensable in re-creating a capitalist norm. Children quickly learn the building blocks to a capitalist narrative. The first step in countering the narrative is changing our language and using truthful words, rather than the imperial fairy tales we were told. The need to challenge the dominating stories that justify colonization and genocide arrive fairly quickly once the kids get to school. Columbus day and Thanksgiving are still told from the perspective of the colonizer. In Kindergarten, M. came home with a Santa Maria ship made out of popsicle sticks to celebrate Columbus Day and the so-called “discovery of America.”

When our kids came home from school with “Indian” headdresses, we were faced with a dilemma. Our urge was to ban the offensive items, but kids naturally love dressing up, so we didn't ban the wearing of them. Instead, we explained that it is not an actual First Nation article of clothing and we discussed the difference between dressing up and stealing/making fun of a people and their culture. We offer a counter-education and read about specific nations like the Lakota Sioux, so they can see the complexities of each different nation. We also read a wonderful series of children's books by native author Louise Erdrich about a family of Ojibwa that must leave their island due to white colonizers. As my friend described, “it's like the non-racist version of Little House on the Prairie.”

It is essential to the capitalist narrative that this country was “settled” by brave, white explorers and that the previous inhabitants were just monolithic, extinct peoples. This is because capitalism needed the “free” land to survive and expand past Europe. New “undeveloped” land was necessary for the capitalists/colonizers to expand from land-poor Europe. Thus, it was also essential that the First Nations of this land were erased

as non-owners and merely inhabitants. Racist constructs depicting the different nations as undifferentiated “savages” with no political system was necessary to justify the genocide of the millions of people that lived in the United States before the colonists.

So when we refer to the first Europeans in the Americas, we don’t call them settlers or Puritans or colonists, but rather imperialists, colonizers, and land grabbers. This contradicts the capitalist, creation myth that white settlers founded this country through brave exploration, rather than mass murder. We refer to the original nations that first lived in these lands as First Nations and then we explain that there were/are many peoples of the First Nations and they all have their own names, like Chippewa, Lakota, Ojibwa, and Powhatan. We seek to re-draw a complex and respectful narrative about the people of the First Nations to reveal that they still exist, still struggle and they have not been exterminated as the capitalist myth asserts. If our children know that the people of the First Nations still survive, then their continued oppression is much harder to justify. This new “creation story” creates a bridge to talking about European imperialism throughout the world.

When our children started school, they also began to bring home imperialist myths about the world beyond North America. The children learned that Egyptians are just mummies, Cleopatra, and pyramids – they are ancient and dead. This narrative was especially ironic during the Egyptian uprising in 2010-2011. Our children watched with us as we were riveted by the struggles in Tahrir Square. They were astonished when we told them it was Egypt and they wanted to know where the pyramids were, but since we had discussed Tahrir Square, A. brought it up in school when the teacher asked what they knew about Egypt.

From Lion King to the Discovery channel, Africa is presented to children as one giant safari of animals and dark-skinned peoples who occasionally help out with the animals. A racist logic that dehumanizes, simplifies, and erases the complexity of an entire continent into one, monolithic “place” without countries, political systems, cities, and languages helps to justify a capitalist practice of genocide and colonization. It also serves to justify the global status quo where 1st world countries hoard the majority of the world’s resources while people in the 3rd world starve. We remind our children all the time that Africa is not a country but a continent, and so we don’t let them say “so and so” was speaking “African.” We ask what country and then remind them that thousands of languages are spoken in the continent of Africa. We look at the map of Africa and explain that Egypt is in Africa, we look at pictures of cities in Kenya and talk about the struggles of resistance in South Africa. We listen to K’naan, a rapper from Somalia, and then find Somalia on the map.

Our challenging the language of genocide and colonization leads me to the other tenet of challenging capitalism as parents, another bone in the new body of narrative that we try and create for our children.

We Talk About Class & Economic Inequality

In a capitalist narrative, class differences don't exist, wealth disparity is "natural", and if you work hard enough, you will have enough money to survive. Furthermore, wealth is created by bankers, businesspeople, and entrepreneurs. Workers are invisible and poor people are lazy. This is all normalized under capitalism.

In order to counter this, we teach our children to see that we are part of a *human created* economic system rather than a "natural" order of things. We discuss our values versus the values promoted under capitalism. We discuss the unfairness of capitalism. We say that we believe that everyone should have what they need to survive: a home, food, and education, enjoyment without having to work for wages to pay for these things. We tell them that people are paid less or more than others but not because they work harder or less hard. We say that our own income is unfair and that people who work much harder than us get paid less than us.

We work to make the workers visible to our children, to un-erase them. We teach them to see workers' hands in everything we touch and see and use. It surprised me actually; A., at the age of 3, asked me, "How does water get into the house?" I answered, "Because workers put in the pipes to bring us the water." Under a traditional, capitalist narrative, I would have unconsciously answered "from the pipes" and left out the workers who laid those pipes. After that first question, I realized how workers are erased from our consciousness; we are taught to celebrate lawyers, politicians, doctors, but never the people who build the tunnels for our subways or take our trash or lay down our roads. In fact, we are trained not to notice workers – to step past them, to look past them. So I take great care to point out the workers as they work, to talk about the ones who died building this city, to notice out loud for my children how our trash is taken away by workers and doesn't just disappear. I notice out loud for my children the domestic workers and park workers in the playground, the janitor at the school.

We explain that because we hold values other than capitalism, we share our income with everyone in our house, and with our family and with the domestic workers at the Filipino worker's center, DAMAYAN. We don't perpetuate the myth that hard work through wage labor will lead to a good life. We talk about money, we tell our children when we can't afford to participate in something or purchase something. We try our best to resist stoking the fires of addiction to consumption. When they were 4, we had our first and only big birthday party, and we had a book exchange, and asked everyone to bring a book. At the end of the party, everyone got a book from the book bucket. Since then we have tried to center birthday celebrations around a fun activity, with

each kid (they are twins) bringing a friend and going to the museum together or having a sleep over.

Some of our family is Christian and I was raised Christian, so Christmas time brings some of the hardest challenges. From the endless commercials, to the catalogs in the mail, to the questions – what do I want from Santa this year, it is very hard to resist this festival of over consumption. In fact, I felt a deep sadness over our choice not to have an orgy of gifts at Christmas because I remember the joy of getting gifts, stacking them, counting them, anticipating them. And suddenly, I realized – that pleasure feeling that I remember was an early beginning to my addiction to consumption! So I was able to keep on with our plan – gifts are kept to a minimum. M. got pads of paper and pencils. We got a new Wii game for the family. Then we had a big, Filipino meal. One year, we went camping on Christmas.

We Discuss & Challenge Racism and White Supremacy.

Critical Race theorists explain how capitalism and white supremacy are intertwined and assert that one cannot be dismantled without dismantling the other. Radical theorist, Ruth Gilmore offers us this definition of racism: an unequal distribution of life chances and opportunities based on a socially-constructed definition of race or ethnicity resulting in premature death. Capitalism is an economic system that relies on inequality and unequal distribution of resources. Therefore, racism and capitalism operate together to increase the wealth and life chances of certain populations through the appropriation of labor, life chances, and wealth of other populations.

We are a family of Filipino and Jewish background. Our children are adopted from the Philippines. Three of our clan just immigrated here in the last five years. My mother emigrated here from the Philippines and was undocumented until she married my US citizen dad. I am light-skinned, my kids are darker skinned. It is complicated and deeply personal, so how do we resist racism?

We try and communicate an anti-racist value system. First, we don't pretend the world is colorblind. We will discuss race and ethnicity and we openly discuss the privilege of being white skinned. When Trayvon Martin was murdered for being a black child in a hoodie, we talked about it at the dinner table. We talk about the concepts of race, ethnicity and heritage as complex, human created concepts. I share my personal, individual experience of racism and my partner shares his stories of anti-Semitism. We try to take these personal, individual stories and link them to a larger, political discussion, but our children are only eight and six. For us, this means that we have to talk about it all the time, simplified, imperfect, and developing in complexity as they get older.

When we talk about laws that we protest, we explain the racism behind many of these laws. We explain that immigration laws are racist and aimed at separating brown and black families from each other and we point out that people from European countries are treated much differently than people from our home country, the Philippines.

Maybe because of this openness to discuss race, our children bring up their own observations about our racial caste system. M. who is a lovely shade of nut brown, said to me that in his observation of the world – clearly being white was better, white skinned people were beautiful. At first it broke my heart that she said this at the age of four, but then I realized that OF COURSE she learned this lesson of white supremacy in our society. It is just because we talk about race all the time that she felt free to say what she had been taught. And even though it was painful to hear, it gave us the opportunity to dispute this narrative and offer her our own values of anti-racism.

We Try To Bust Through Gender Norms and Encourage Our Children to Create Their Own Gender Narratives

Hetero-patriarchy is another cornerstone of capitalism. Strict gender constructs are an essential component of a developed capitalist economy. When European societies transitioned from a feudal economy to a capitalist one, a division between wage labor and unpaid “domestic labor” was created. Work that is necessary to the reproduction of a worker or a laboring class became unpaid work, subsumed and erased in the home and gendered as “women’s” work. This tiny family unit, standing alone, is quite fragile in a capitalist economy, and wage labor becomes necessary for survival. The state is able to claim that it has no responsibility for the reproduction of labor, even though it needs this work in order to have access to a replenished labor supply of willing workers.

Many feminists, radical theorists, and queer theorists have asserted that a gender binary system and the patriarchal, heterosexual family is a building block for capitalism. It is in the heteropatriarchal family that children first learn much of their ideas about a gender binary system. It is in school that these ideas about gender, gender roles, and sexuality become cemented even more.

We have two children for whom we are the primary caregivers, one who may or may not be a “girl” and one who may or may not be a “boy”. They both get the “Dora sheets” or the “train” sheets, depending on the laundry situation. We don’t link gender to a particular color. But capitalism relies on a specific set of gender cues, rules, and strict division, and children learn these rules early on, even outside school. These are enforced through other people, mothers, children, and advertisements.

For instance, A. loved pink and he specifically picked out a pink scooter and rode it proudly until age 4, when other boys on the playground made fun of him for riding a “girl” colored scooter. He refused to ride the pink scooter again. Another time, when my

children were 4, they went to a birthday party where the party was divided into a “girls” room filled with princess and pink clothes for dress up and a “boys” room filled with knights' costumes and other warrior type clothes. When my son M. tried to go to the “boys” room, the mother steered him towards the “girls” room, saying “don’t you want to try on some princess clothes?” because he was assigned female at birth. Our friend, who had accompanied them to the party, protected M. and took him to the boys’ side, explaining to the mother that our family was not into reinforcing traditional gender roles. M. quickly grabbed a sword and ran off.

In kindergarten, the schools begin to divide children by gender; girls in one line and boys in another. At this age, many children may still not think in gender binary terms and will float from line to line, only to have the teachers steer them into their “correct” line.

One of our children, M., who was assigned female at birth, has begun questioning his gender. He will now only wear “boy” clothes and we celebrate him in all his glorious, emerging masculinity! We asked him if he wanted to use different pronouns or to rename himself with a different name, but for now he is still using “she” pronouns –we made it clear that he can change his mind someday if he wants. He attended a Sylvia Rivera Law Project meeting where he saw people that reminded him of his own gender-questioning self and we are grateful that he has that supportive space. He often states that she feels like a boy inside and we tell him that he can be as “boy”/ “boy” as he wants to be. He is now in 2nd grade, and the other children sometimes ask him if she is a boy or a girl. He has now proudly started saying he is a tomboy. We have never used that word in our discussions, but if he feels good about it then it is enough. Once, when I was in the classroom, a girl asked me why M. never wore dresses, I said “well, because M. doesn’t want to.” The little girl nodded and said, my mom would never let me get away with that. This was a revelation to me – I had assumed that this little girl was singling M. out for his choice in a bad way, but actually it seemed she admired M. and wanted to know how “she got away with it.”

Challenging compulsory heterosexuality is also a priority for us. When we talk about our children’s possible partners, we don’t limit their choices of gender. We refer to a wide range of possibilities, women, men, or the choice to have no partner. “One day you may be with someone, a boy or a girl. Maybe you will choose to be married, but you don’t have to.” I have explained to our children, that even though I am with their dad and want to be just with him, if I was single, that I would date boys OR girls. I explain that I think that all genders are pretty. It’s funny, coming out to your children, because they don’t care. They love you no matter what, so my kids just nodded ok, no big deal.

These conversations are challenging because our culture equates biology, gender and sexuality all the time. We lack the vocabulary to discuss complexity when it comes to gender. The English language just has this binary system – girl or boy. But as a family, we try to create a big enough empty space so that they can fill it themselves. We admit it is hard.

We Try to Encourage Emotional Openness and Emotional Bravery

Capitalism also relies on our own personal alienation from our human nature to cooperate, socialize, and the desire to do meaningful work. The factory, the retail chain store, the nursing homes are necessarily places where we have to leave much of our true selves at the door. Many Marxist theorists have discussed the alienating nature of work in an industrial society. Prior to a wage-labor economy, many people worked for subsistence—in the fields to feed themselves or in their homes to clothe themselves. In many places work was about personal or community survival, not creating profit for an employer. Convincing people to work for pay and abandon any sense of personal ownership was hard. Farmers didn't want to work in the factory. Mandatory education was implemented in order to get children raised on a farm acclimated to a type of learning that was divorced and alienated from their everyday life. Capitalists also needed to get children used to responding to a set schedule, responding to bells and an outside authority. In other words, capitalists needed to create disciplined workers. A step to that creation is normalizing wage labor devoid of any personal meaning to our whole selves. Under capitalism, we are emotionally divided, trying to find meaningful work that we care about while subsuming our desires and emotional needs in order to go into the factory, or fast food chain restaurant, or retail store and earn wages.

Another facet of capitalist logic teaches us to ignore our human instinct to help and cooperate with other living creatures. In our society, people are understood as “naturally” competitive and individualistic. But in reality, humans throughout history have clustered together to survive. Children have to be taught to ignore a stranger who is homeless or suffering on the street. In fact, children have to be taught the difference between family and strangers. In school, children are encouraged to strive and achieve as individuals. My kids come home bragging when the teacher promotes one of them to a new reading level. Children are not rewarded for the success of the group, but the success of one. Their emotions are rarely, if ever addressed. Gold stars are not given for emotional bravery but rather for obedience to the teacher, sitting still on the rug or perfect attendance.

Learning to respect and honor our full selves and learning how to communicate these selves and cooperate in a community is central to what we are sharing with our children. This may be the hardest lesson because we are still learning this one ourselves. When M. was just 6 and in kindergarten, he began to have full-blown panic attacks at school. We found him a therapist to help him with his anxiety. Through his own journey, we have all learned a lot. We learned how important it is to talk about our fears and anxieties and if we don't face our fears, we still find them waiting for us around some corner. We all try to practice emotional bravery. And by bravery, we don't mean a false, stoic bravado that is actually alienation, but rather being brave enough to be true to our feelings and ourselves. We hope to make it possible for them to question

authority, to critically examine the different narratives presented to them and to be brave enough to create their own.

We try hard to create a sense of community between the children and we try to encourage them to think like a team. For instance, from the beginning, we said no telling on each other, unless it was something dangerous. We didn't want to create an atmosphere of snitching and punishment. Our nephew moved in last year with us, and our children are terribly jealous. We try and give them the space to safely express these feelings, through talking about their strong feelings without retribution for them, drawing about their feelings and giving them alone time. We also have many spontaneous dance parties, which really seem to help us all come together. A year later, we still struggle with jealousy, anger and resentment, but in between those hard moments, there is love and laughter and community.

It Is A Work in Progress

In the end, we know that we are deeply entrenched in a capitalist society. After all, we haven't left the "grid." We work for wages, our children enjoy getting new, consumer goods, they watch endless commercials and see advertisements all around them. Every day our children are subjected to violent lessons of capitalism – racism, ableism, homophobia, sexism, and state violence through police oppression and the caging of people.

Nevertheless, we hope that if we can peel back the layers of the capitalist narrative, we can help them construct their own narrative of resistance. We hope that we provide them a sense of their own wholeness so they won't need to strive to "be" someone or to acquire their sense of self through consumption and private ownership. We hope to replace the bleak capitalist picture of a world of limited resources, merciless individualism, normalized economic violence, racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia with one of hope and optimism. We hope to give them a few new bones for their body of ideas and the understanding that they can create and add their own. Hopefully, our children will be the next builders and creators of an anti-capitalist resistance.

Postscript:

Our teenagers taught me that there is no success story at the end of childhood, that the launching into independence is impossible and it is just enough that they are alive.

"Parenting teenagers is an extreme sport" are words I uttered a lot in the last 5 years. Teens are still children but in the bodies of almost adults. Their body proportions are off kilter like puppies, with their emotions naturally swinging from highs to lows. They see

the world with new, adult eyes and they realize they have been betrayed. Adults make bad decisions, we marched in the street for Eric Garner when they were children, only to watch an unending stream of Black men and women be murdered by the state with no consequence. They are taught in school that the civil rights movement was victorious only to see an openly racist, misogynist elected President. They also see me, the parent, as a fallible human being. Teenagers see through our own lies we tell ourselves. They see our Facebook posts bragging about our child's accomplishments, what high school they got into, their soccer score. They know innately, as parents, that our stories of their success make us look good.

As our child descended into the hell of depression during the Covid shutdown, I learned that I needed to let go of the capitalist narrative of a successful parent – where your child goes to school, finishes their assignments, goes to college, or even in the alternative, goes to trade school, gets a job, becomes independent. He challenged me – he said you want me to go to do these things so you can brag to your friends. And no, that is not entirely true. but yes, it is partially true.

It is also true that I desperately wanted them both to become independent of me because I am terrified that I won't be able to protect them anymore. But in truth, we can never truly protect our children from the violence of a market economy. Or from the violence of hetero-patriarchy or white supremacy. And in the end, none of us are truly independent. We need each other, we need community.

In a narrative of resisting capitalism, we must acknowledge our co-dependence because independence is an illusion, part of the capitalist myth. The billionaires are dependent on stolen labor in order to accumulate their wealth. My child's worth is not about what he produces or achieves, they are worthy even when unable to get out of bed, even if he never finishes high school, or goes to college. I learned to let go of all of my stories for him in those terrifying months of loving someone in deep depression. The deep, quiet, darkness challenged me to stop trying to "fix" him. And just to love them. And maybe that is our best resistance to capitalism.

THE LOAN FUND - Mac Liman, 2011 with an afterword from 2023

In 2007 I was 25 years old. I was living communally in Denver, raising chickens and teaching bicycle mechanics, growing and dumpstering food, working at a bookstore with my mom and my twin brother, and trying to be a good friend and neighbor. That year my dad informed me that I owned \$20,000 worth of stock in the S&P 500.

I am a rich kid. My dad has a lot of money and I was raised owning class. By 2007 I had been thinking/writing/reading/talking for a few years about being raised rich. My class privilege affected the choices I made about my activism and also my daily life since I had no debt. My family could help cover the cost of medical supplies for my type 1 diabetes, and my parents paid when we traveled or went out to eat. But this was the first time that I had direct control over inherited money.

Meanwhile my housemate Chad had amassed a sizable debt on his US Bank credit card after several years of traveling, choosing more-fulfilling-but-lower-paying jobs and working to start his own farm. He shared anxiety about his debt; about the monthly payments and interest rates and how the stress and guilt and awfulness increased exponentially when he was delinquent on a payment. He felt that after all his intentional choices to make the world a better place he was still sending a big check to a massive bank every month. He told me he was the kind of middle class Christian man who didn't mind that "money comes and goes" in his life. And yet these payments were outpacing his income, and where this particular money was going felt extra bad.

Over the course of a year I sold the stocks. I donated \$4,000 to local social justice organizations, lent \$9,000 to a friend's business to pay down a line of credit, used \$4,000 as down-payment on a shared house, and squirreled away \$1,000 in my bedside table. The remaining funds were just about \$2,000 – exactly what Chad needed to pay off his debt and stop patronizing US Bank.

Chad and I set a coffee date to discuss our respective two-thousand-dollar-situations and what it could feel and look like to use my inheritance to pay off his debt. So began the Loan Fund.

Feelings first: I didn't feel like this money was "mine." I wanted it to be used for good and I needed help to do that. I was excited to have someone else to make decisions with about this money. I care about Chad. I was glad that we had been honest enough about class and money that we could make this connection in the first place. On some level, Chad believed he did not deserve financial help and his credit card debt was proof that he was inherently irresponsible or stupid; that he deserved the stress and

compounding consequences. We agreed that this situation was proof that money and wealth coming in and out of people's lives is not often related to merit. If he is stupid for not having a safety net to draw from, does that mean I am smarter or better because I was born to parents who gave me this money to loan? I conceded that I am *occasionally* more responsible when it comes to feeding the chickens and washing dishes at home, but I am neither better nor more deserving. We both agreed this should be something we do without blame or shame.

Logistics: Chad asked that we use the money as a loan and agreed we should co-create the terms so that we could make it work for both of us as well as possible. I had two requirements for the terms: 1) It must be 0% interest. I don't like the idea of making money from money, or that people who do not already have money should have to pay more to have some. 2) We should set up a way to communicate about the progress of payments to allow for flexibility and so I could avoid being the only one to "bring it up" (I worried I would feel or act like a loan officer). Chad required 1) that there be enough structure to keep him accountable (he worried he would forget about the Loan Fund if there wasn't some way to keep this present in his mind and monthly budget) and 2) that he cancel his credit card ASAP.

We brainstormed and did math about the amount and frequency of payments and ways to make sure it could change as time went on. We ultimately decided he would use the \$2,000 to pay the full balance on the card and then make \$70 monthly payments — much more affordable than the credit card payment — to me for 2.5 years. We would have quarterly check-ins to be pre-set in our calendars and initiated by both of us. The money would be kept in a green envelope in my room, and we would check off each payment on a register as it was made. As the money was returned, it would become "The Loan Fund." We wrote all this up as a "Comraderandum" that we both signed electronically and filed away in an email folder somewhere. I wrote him a check and he paid off the credit card immediately!

The most encouraging part for me was that Chad could regain some positive feelings about what he was doing in his life and with his money. After hiding and fretting about this credit card for so long, he couldn't wait to return to feeling gratitude for his privileges. Additionally, we both felt like his income that would no longer be paid to US Bank was suddenly *extra* valuable. Not only would Chad have new disposable income, but it was money we had saved from the evil grasp of a corporate bank! With this loan, we had ensured that Chad's money would never be used as a predatory loan or to finance a detention center or to lobby for oil; we felt like superheroes. This thought was so compelling that we created an addendum to the Comraderandum: The money Chad saved by refinancing with the Loan Fund would **ONLY** be used for things that are **Totally Awesome** – things that make him happy, grateful, excited about life, and hopeful for the future.

At the time, we were both volunteer Hotline Advocates on a 24-hour crisis line operated by a kickass queer liberation organization called The Colorado Anti-Violence Program (CAVP). Chad decided to give a portion of the “rescued” money to CAVP. For him, the opposite of giving money to US Bank was supporting social justice community organizing and so that’s what he did.

After several months of payments came in from Chad, I found myself in conversation with another friend who discovered she had \$200 of student loan administrative fees that would prevent her from getting transcripts (another \$200) to apply for grad school (also expensive). I explained the Loan Fund and my arrangement with Chad and she asked to borrow. We met, laid out our fears and concerns, wrote up the terms of the loan, and created another green envelope.

As of today, eight people (including myself) have borrowed money from the Loan Fund. The money has been used to pay rent during times of unexpected unemployment, pay overdraft fees, pay off credit card debt, front emergency money to a direct service organization that was temporarily caught up in bureaucratic delays, and post bond. Most recently, money was loaned to Occupy Denver for legal support. The amounts have ranged from \$180 to \$2,000. \$1,500 is out in the world right now; \$500 is in my dresser drawer.

Not everything has been feel-good or easy, though. I have learned a lot along the way and still have unanswered questions. What I learned: This happened because two friends talked to each other about money. I had been talking about my class privilege with friends and housemates for some time (thanks to organizations like Resource Generation and the Chinook Fund), and so I knew it would not be a shock when I told people I inherited money and began asking them what they thought I should do with it. Even so, I was nervous to talk about how uncomfortable and angry and confused and scared having these resources made me feel. I feared that people would think it was ridiculous or insulting that I feel stress about *having* money while most people around me feel stress for not having enough. I worried that it would make us further apart rather than closer together. When Chad told me about the stress he was experiencing about paying his credit card bills and not being able to save up for a truck or to visit family or do things he cares about, I’m glad my fear didn’t silence me. If it had, we might never have made this connection.

Talking about this money was sometimes insulting and/or irritating to people, though. But I also discovered that talking about my inheritance devoid of emotion was often even *more* insulting. It sounded like “not only do I have this and you don’t, but I don’t even have feelings about it.” I was sharing \$ in the spirit of anti-capitalism and redistribution, but without showing my struggles I was being less authentic and trustworthy, and that denial had the potential to dismiss the huge feelings that *everybody* has about classism and money. This is a pattern in lots of parts of my

life – many relationships have suffered from me trying to be pragmatic, downplay my emotions and seem like I have my shit together – and I learned some of this from my owning class upbringing. With practice, this can shift.

The biggest challenge is that I have put the Loan Fund into an ambiguous ownerless position. The money I inherited never felt like it was mine so in many ways I treat the Loan Fund like it is also “not mine.” “It’s not my money; it’s the Loan Fund,” I say. I assure borrowers that the consequence of not paying is that someone else won’t be able to borrow that money to deal with whatever situation they need it for, but I won’t stop inviting them to dinner or wrenching on bikes with them because they owe “it” money. I actually trust that I can notice, interrupt and deal if I am feeling discomfort or resentment because of someone’s behavior related to the Loan Fund, but saying “it’s not mine” sometimes feels like a sneaky way to avoid hard feelings.

Plus, it remains that you must know *me* to know the Fund exists and to ask for the money. I accept and account for the payments. If someone doesn’t pay, I’m the one they talk to. And in the event that someday someone who asks for a loan doesn’t get it, I will be the one who makes that decision. On the one hand, distancing the money from myself has made it emotionally easier for me to lend and easier for others to receive (some have literally said “I wouldn’t feel right borrowing money from you, friend, but since it’s the Loan Fund...”) but it has also made it less accountable. If something belongs to everyone or to no one, who is responsible for mismanagement? Who do you call out if something’s not right? And if the same mistakes are repeated, what then? These are questions I will continue to ask to borrowers and friends.

When people do not pay back money to the fund, there also is little accountability. Each borrower sets up a structure beforehand for how they want to make payments and handle delays or adjust amounts. But some people still have never paid back the money. And some I expect never will. Almost everyone has taken longer to re-pay than expected because cars break down, jobs are lost, friendships change, and pregnancy, medical emergencies and bigger needs take priority. I am glad the loans can be put “on hold” for these reasons. This is a tremendous opportunity to extend my class privilege to the people around me. In my life, having a financial safety net has meant having the ability to shift priorities as things come up, weather financial emergencies, and take time to think through a crisis or change without being punished with future limitations and fees. But my vision of a more equitable society includes accountability and I’m not always sure how to do that. I want all of us to be lovingly and compassionately held responsible for our actions, but I notice I am most concerned with how to ensure people and institutions with more money and power are held responsible first and foremost. When the practice of lending money and sharing privilege depends on my having so much that one can live without it being returned, then we will continue to depend on excess and inequality – this is not my goal. Historically there have been no consequences for and very little follow-up with the people who haven’t repaid the Loan

Fund. One overdue borrower's phone is repeatedly shut off so I stopped calling. But another borrower ended up repaying one full year after telling me she never would. For now, I don't have any plans to change what happens when a loan isn't repaid.

Not everyone who borrowed money from the Fund ended up using a portion "for something Totally Awesome," but the addendum became a nice genesis story for the Loan Fund. "Refinancing" to free up resources to help each other, make each other happier, and work together to escape cycles of debt and powerlessness. The Loan Fund can be one example of how to lend and borrow money that doesn't feel soul-sucking. It is an alternative to needing extractive banks to deal with an emergency or get shit done. An alternative to being stuck, trapped, scammed, or conned. It reduces – and sometimes entirely avoids – guilt, shame, self-doubt, and resentment. It is more grounded in our lives, friendships and activism, and has flexibility and creativity. I have hopes to include more people in the process of "stewarding" the Fund. And I hope that it keeps moving and keeps bringing me closer to people.

Chad is still one of my dearest friends. We lived together for four years and participated in dozens of house meetings and projects together. He once took me to the emergency room at 3:am when I overdosed on insulin. He has visited my dad's mansion in the mountains and attended my Aunt Susie's funeral. He made his last payment to the Loan Fund about six months ago. This was one year past the intended final payment date and still \$490 short of what he originally agreed to repay. He is living in Chicago now, awaiting the arrival of a new baby. And we still talk about resisting capitalism and the politics of money – jobs, bosses, classism, work ethics, what our families think about it, how it moves around and how it doesn't – all the time. I am still trying to use my class privilege and access to my family's money for social change. And I stand to inherit over a million dollars some day. Then as now, I will need Chad and all my friends to connect that money to where it really needs to be.

AFTERWORD

It's 2023! When I wrote this piece 12 years ago I remember trying to "keep it simple and hopeful." There was/is so much that's overwhelmingly complex about wealth inequality and how money impacts our relationships but I wanted to encourage fellow people with class privilege to push past some of the noise and TRY something. Rereading it now, it sounds oversimplified AND it's still true that running an informal loan fund for my friends, housemates, and community members for 11 years was a light lift and totally worth it.

I'm forever grateful that I got to cultivate an early relationship with money that asks "to whom does this *really* belong?", that values movement and experimentation, and that practices using \$ as a tool for good – grounded to feelings and friendship.

Chad and I are still friends and still love each other. He traveled from Chicago to attend my big queer wedding this past summer. He is having a second kid soon. Since 2012, I have added about \$5,000 and 7 new borrowers to this rotating fund over the years. It's clear that this is/was a small action in the face of global personal debt, but the confidence and skills that came from lending at this scale enabled and normalized larger personal and community actions. I am a member of a co-op investment club, I supported several foundations to divest endowment dollars from the stock market and reinvest in low- and no-interest loans to grantee organizations, and I convinced my dad to invest \$50,000 in a fund for BIPOC entrepreneurship in rural Colorado. I continue to campaign for economic justice, mass debt cancellation, and a Just Transition to a Solidarity Economy that will serve us all. At age 40, I don't regret having shared, loaned nor given a single dollar in my life; I only wish at times that I had done more. Please join me and let's keep each other posted on what happens next.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE HUMMINGBIRD COLLECTIVE

- The Hummingbird Collective, 2024

When the Hummingbird collective formed, Arizona's SB1070 was the worst anti-immigrant legislation in the country. SB1070 illuminated the right-wing national strategy of terrorizing undocumented people, laying the groundwork for Trump in a pre-Trump era. The organizing against SB1070 was the pivotal moment around building investment and infrastructure in the grassroots Left in Arizona. Arizona went blue — and is now a swing state — not because of the local or national Dem party, but because of the grassroots organizing led by undocumented people during the SB1070 resistance, and how it shaped Arizona grassroots organizing since. Over the years, Hummingbird Collective moved \$453,000 to immigrant justice.

While the Hummingbird collective funding model was imperfect, it made some crucial interventions in the scope, scale and breadth of donor organizing across the country. Specifically, it opened the door to more national formations of donors organizing each other to move money to movements, and laid the groundwork for organizations like RG and Solidaire to organize and fundraise members.

January 2013

From theory to Action

Dedicated to funding grassroots, people of color-led organizing for migrant and border justice in Arizona, the Hummingbird Collective is co-organized by grassroots organizations in Arizona and young people with access to wealth from across the country. This project redistributes wealth in order to support movements to end oppressive systems that keep us separated along lines of class, race and citizenship. We believe that no one is free until everyone is free.

In November 2010, at a conference put on by Resource Generation (RG) called Making Money Make Change (MMMC), a small group of young people with class privilege and access to wealth connected with organizers working in the heart of the human rights crisis in Arizona. This group of people decided to begin a process to move money to grassroots migrant justice work in Arizona, forming what is now known as the Hummingbird Collective. This essay was written by three white, class-privileged, queer women who have been centrally involved in organizing the Hummingbird Collective. While this essay details a collaborative process, we are speaking specifically from our own positions in this work. Unless otherwise specified, “we” in this essay refers to the class-privileged people involved in organizing this project.

At the MMMC conference, Carlos Garcia of PUENTE and Marisa Franco of the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON) presented a workshop on migrant justice struggles in Arizona. They painted an alarming picture of the racist and harsh anti-immigrant climate in Arizona. SB 1070 had recently been passed – a law that legalized racial profiling as part of a strategy of attrition for migrant communities in the state. This strategy focuses on making the lives of migrants so difficult that they will self-deport. Just a few months prior, over 200,000 people took the streets of Phoenix in resistance to SB 1070, a mobilization that was possible because of strong long-term organizing and existing grassroots infrastructure.

We chose to focus on Arizona because it is one particularly important battleground in the struggle against racism in the U.S. today, and for migrant justice in particular. The state has long been a strategic testing ground for the Right's anti-immigrant policies, as well as a place where frontline communities develop models and movements to turn the tide from hate to human rights. B. Loewe, an organizer with NDLON, explains: "Change happens when people who are being targeted by oppression see themselves as actors, when those that are targeted by SB1070 stand up against it and organize, so our responsibility as organizers and funders is to support them."

Through the Hummingbird Collective, we created a space for progressive young people with wealth to come together, connect, and learn from past models of radical, creative, and accountable giving, while working towards putting our own model into practice. At MMMC, we learned from people who have organized small radical funding projects. For example, the Gulf South Allied Funders was a group of Resource Generation members who, in collaboration with the 21st Century Foundation (a Black foundation based in the Gulf South), moved three million dollars from their own communities, as well as through their connections in institutional philanthropy, to support organizing in the Gulf South in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Through learning from people who have done similar work before, we were encouraged to believe in the possibility of redistributing wealth boldly and creatively, in cross-class and multi-racial collaboration led by people most affected by injustice. The eight of us who met at MMMC were at different points in our political development and our experience with organizing when we formed this project. We are all white, majority queer, and women, genderqueer people, and men. Many of us have direct access to varying amounts of inherited wealth. Several of us have no current access to inheritance, but have wealthy families. While we are able to contribute in different amounts and means, for the purposes of this essay, we are all "Hummingbird donors." We came together around a strong desire to take action in solidarity with movements for racial and economic justice and to redistribute the money our families have unjustly accumulated over decades or centuries through white supremacist capitalism.

We began by educating ourselves about the migrant justice movement, and Arizona in particular, deepening our understanding of our own role in supporting this work as

people with various privileges. Through weekly conference calls, we became close as a group and challenged ourselves to articulate answers to questions like: “What is our stake in this work?” and “Why are we, as predominantly white, class-privileged people who aren’t from AZ, interested in supporting organizing in the state?” We began with a lot of research: we interviewed people we knew who were involved in migrant justice organizing, read articles and political analysis about Arizona and immigration, and interviewed people who had organized giving projects. Two Phoenix-based class privileged organizers — who had been working with several of the migrant justice organizations we collaborate with — became involved with the Hummingbird Collective after its initial formation, and it has been invaluable to have their AZ-based support with logistics, communication, and bridge-building. Because organizing is so much about relationships, the pre-existing relationships these two people had to the Arizona organizers formed a basis for deepening trust and connection.

As a group of donors, we had many discussions about how much money we were able to commit to giving, personally. The amounts we were committed to giving grew over time as we became more invested in the fight for migrant justice, in this project, and in each other. The amounts that we have individually committed range from \$100 to \$5,000, to \$60,000, to \$150,000. Over time, we challenged each other to give more, and supported each other in the fears that come up around giving away a whole lot of money: fear of reprisal from family, fear of losing financial security, fear that we are making “irresponsible” choices. We helped each other to ground in the reality that real security lies in relationships, and to be realistic about the ways that we, as white, class-privileged people with wealthy families, have incredibly strong safety nets that surround us. In the early stages of the project we were able to tell our partner organizations that we could commit to approximately \$200,000 to \$300,000. Figuring out good practices around financial transparency has been a consistent challenge, especially as donors’ commitments have shifted over time. In total, with our own donations and our fundraising, we currently expect to move about \$500,000 over 3 to 4 years.

What we believe

Together, we have learned a lot, and have come to understand that change happens through broad-based movements led by people of color, poor and working class people, and women. With this understanding, we believe that we need to shift decision-making power about what happens with money away from ourselves as donors and inheritors, and toward the organizers whose leadership we believe will bring about liberatory change. We have a strong critique of traditional philanthropy, which we know from its inception has served to maintain the power of the owning class by safeguarding large amounts of concentrated wealth from taxation. Decisions about this vast amount of money are consistently made by the owning class, and a tiny fraction of it goes to support grassroots movements organizing for systemic change.

We also share a belief in collective liberation. Collective liberation is the idea that our individual liberation depends on the liberation of all people. Oppression affects all of us in different ways, and we know that people of color, and working class people around the world disproportionately bear the brunt of that brutality and inequality. While we are privileged in many ways by these systems of domination as people with class and race privilege, we also believe that we have a very personal and tangible stake in ending capitalism and white supremacy. Changing these systems will help us heal our relationships with our families, allow us to reclaim our own ethnic and cultural heritages, help us heal from the dehumanization of oppressing other people, and rejoin the rest of humanity.

In short, we are in this work for ourselves as well as for people bearing the brunt of oppression. We understand that money comes from land, labor, and natural resources, and that wealth is created through underpaid or unpaid labor, land theft, and exploitation of natural resources. A friend says it simply with the phrase: “White folks have Black folk’s money.” We know that not only African Americans have been exploited under capitalism, but this simple phrase gets at the fact that racism has meant the systematic transfer of wealth from people of color to white people (mostly men). We believe it’s our responsibility to give the money back.

The Delegation to Arizona

Early on, we worked with Carlos Garcia and another organizer based in AZ, Leahjo Carnine, to plan for a delegation to AZ in April 2011. In the span of three days, we met with a dozen organizations working on migrant and border justice, attended a protest against the now-recalled Senator Russell Pearce (author of SB1070), and were led on a tour of the U.S./Mexico border by a No More Deaths representative. We met with Isabel Garcia from Coalición de Derechos Humanos who took us to Operation Streamline in Tucson, where each day, seventy migrants are chained and mass-charged with ‘illegal entry’ in a dehumanizing show of border enforcement. We met with over twenty youth from Tierra Y Libertad in Tucson, who toured us through the native plant garden and the neighborhood mural they were working on. We learned about the day-laborer-led organizing happening at the Southside Worker’s Center.

We made our way back up to Phoenix for inspiring conversations with Dream Act students about their community education work, and a provoking dialogue with Tupac Enrique from an Indigenous embassy, where he pushed us to take the front lines in this struggle. We had a barbeque with some of the queer people of color in 3rd Space, and met with leaders of Puente’s Barrio Defense committees, or neighborhood organizing groups. We heard about multi-racial alliance building from organizers with the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, and attended a community-building barbeque organized by the Arizona Worker’s Rights Center.

A powerful element of the trip was the cross-class, multi-racial dialogues we had about class and money with the organizers we met in Arizona. We had discussions about our experiences with class and race, and gained deeper understandings of interdependence, community, and isolation. The personal tone of these conversations led us to feel more accountable to this project, and lay the foundation for the relationships that would guide Hummingbird's work. The experience of being fully present in all of our identities was one that many of us had rarely had in other activist spaces, and it felt powerful, transformative, and the kind of transparency that our movements need if we're going to figure out how to fund and support grassroots organizing across lines of class and race.

A challenge we've faced throughout this process has been figuring out the balance between operating with transparency and openness, and over-sharing. The line between building trust through openness, and unfairly asking people to hold our process around our privileges is a fine one. This has been a consistent challenge, to which there aren't easy answers.

After the life-changing delegation to Arizona, we went back to our respective homes, knowing that we would stay connected with the grassroots organizers we'd met, including being joined by the first Phoenix-based Hummingbird member. Throughout the delegation and in the following months, we informally partnered with eight of the organizations in Arizona: Tierra Y Libertad, the Southside Day Laborers Center, Coalición de Derechos Humanos in Tucson, 3rd Space, Arizona Dream Act Coalition, Puente Human Rights Movement, the Arizona Worker Rights Center, and the Black Alliance for Just Immigration in Phoenix. Seeing it as a first step towards broadly funding the grassroots migrant justice movement in Arizona, we focused on building trust and working relationships with people from those eight organizations. We have discussed opening the fund more broadly at some point, though this remains to be seen.

In the months following the delegation, we had had to figure out how to take all of what we had learned in Arizona, and work with the local organizers to develop a structure and plan for how to redistribute money. We sought to do this in a way that gives decision-making power to the organizers who are working day in and day out in AZ, without attaching the strings of traditional foundations. We have struggled throughout this project to find a balance between maintaining our meaningful connections with AZ organizers, and taxing their time and energy with too many one-on-one phone conversations and emails. It took us several months to learn how to streamline our communication internally. We wanted to intentionally follow the leadership of the organizations we'd partnered with, while also taking initiative in a project we had created and were driving forward.

Decision to move money before a structure was in place:

By the end of the summer, after months of grappling with big questions like “What can we do with money, together, that will fund AZ organizing in new ways?” we had not moved any money. We did not yet have a decision-making process in place through which we could make decisions about funding in a way that included AZ organizers in the process. This was holding us back from moving any money. We wanted to build trust by actually showing up with money, and it was apparent that the organizations we were working with had pressing needs for funding. In August 2011, we moved an initial round of \$1,000 grants to each of the eight organizations, framed (with input from people in AZ) as stipends for participation in the process. In November, we decided to move an additional \$40,000 to those same organizations.

Through many conversations with people who advised our process and those we were working with in AZ, we decided against our initial idea of granting the same amount to every organization. Instead, a small group of the Hummingbird donors made decisions about how much to give each organization depending on their size, need, and organizing capacity. We had organizations give us very simple grant applications (essentially a one-page description of what they wanted to do with the funding). Four of us went through a process of deciding how much to give to each organization. This process was imperfect. It was really hard. We felt overwhelmed and like we shouldn’t be the ones making decisions about this money. A friend once told us: “This [funding] work is always going to feel fucked up because it *is* fucked up, but that’s not a reason not to do it.” At the end of the day, we had moved \$40,000 more to support critical work, instead of waiting another six months until we had completed a collective process for decision-making.

A complicated inter-dependence:

Nine months after the Hummingbird delegation to Arizona, we found ourselves preparing for the first in-person, cross-class retreat that would bring together two representatives from each of the eight Arizona organizations, and a handful of national and local Hummingbird Collective members to pull together a funding model, process, and decision-making body for the project. We started by creating a planning committee for the retreat, with the two Phoenix-based Hummingbird members, and one person from five of the eight organizations to plan out the retreat logistics, agenda and the decision-making at the heart of the project.

The planning committee grappled with how to create a space that would build trust between the folks in the room: how to best navigate the cross-race & class dynamics, as well as the inter-Arizona Left histories. We had conversations about how to dismantle competition in a massively underfunded grassroots Left. We talked about how to tell a collective story of this project that doesn’t solely center Hummingbird

donors, but acknowledges and lifts up the histories of collaboration that have existed outside of Hummingbird, while also recognizing how this funding project creates a collective decision-making body and collaboration that hasn't previously existed. Paramount for us donor members is the awareness of the ways that our own lineages of white and class privilege within the systems of white supremacy and capitalism have created and perpetuated divides between communities of color for generations. We also wanted to stay present in how those very real divisions play out in racial justice movements, and how to come into a local movement, largely from the outside, as people with privilege in a way that holds that larger context in order to fund, support and stand in solidarity with these movements as best as we can.

Our most basic goal for the retreat was to create a funding model that redirects decision-making power into the hands of the organizers on the ground. But it was much more than that. We wanted to build a space where the ever-present tensions around money — for both majority working class organizers of color and class privileged Hummingbird members — could be aired in honesty. Through collective process, intention, and guidance from leaders in the same communities from which wealth has always been extracted, we envisioned how that money could be reorganized, redistributed, and reclaimed to support local justice movements aimed at massive social and economic transformation.

Through the planning committee meetings, the process of Arizona organizers taking ownership of the project began to materialize and solidify. At the first meeting, Mariana del Hierro from the Worker Rights Center said, "it's like our family money." The potential for the project seemed to open up. Family, and money, and family money can all be complicated themes in our lives, for very different reasons. For the Hummingbird donors, 'family money' is the means through which wealth and inheritance is transmitted and hoarded. So for that term to be reclaimed and used by working class organizers of color set the tone for a re-imagining of the meaning of 'family money', and the potential of the entire project.

Since our first trip to Arizona, Hummingbird donors have been trying to create the space for Arizona organizers to take part in creating and owning a collective funding model. While not wanting to expect an unrealistic time or energy commitment from already overtaxed organizers, we believe that in order for the funding model to be truly led by those most impacted, there must be a significant level of ownership and investment by Arizona organizers. For almost a year, we had tried to facilitate that process, through conference calls and one-on-one conversations, by trying to support the Arizona organizers getting together in person independently, and by reiterating that intention as a primary goal for the project. It wasn't until the retreat that we heard feedback that the Arizona organizers more fully felt like this project could be theirs.

At one point, mid-way through the day, one of the facilitators mentioned that the invitation was for this project to be *all of ours*, and for Arizona organizers to move from seeing the Hummingbird Collective as ‘them’ to ‘us’. The transition from *them* (meaning the Hummingbird donors), to *us* (meaning a multi-racial, cross-class body of organizers united) was surprisingly easy. Together, we talked about how to distinguish between the donors and Arizona organizers, while seeing everyone as part of the Hummingbird Collective. This transition signified a shift in the project towards front-line Arizona organizers and Hummingbird donors working collectively to fund a *movement* for migrant justice in Arizona.

By the time the Hummingbird donors and Arizona organizers started actually making decisions together, the trust that had been built, and the large amount of investment from everyone in the room, was such that decision-making went smoothly and quickly. There was dynamic dialogue, questions and concerns raised and collectively addressed. We spent time getting to know each other more deeply. For example, by every participant bringing a personally-meaningful object, which we then told a story about to the full group. Silly energizing exercises facilitated a lot of laughter. Eventually, we decided on a rotating 7-person decision-making body made up of a slight majority of Arizona organizers (4), and a slight minority of Hummingbird donors (3). We talked about non-traditional ways of report-backs and applications, including collective story-sharing parties, video projects about the work each organization has done with the money, or any creative means that organizations choose.

We are getting something profound out of this project. The theme of inter-dependence has been stirring around since we initially came together over a year ago. It’s a complicated inter-dependence, but a connection across differences where all of us are both receiving and giving. For underfunded grassroots organizations (fighting laws like SB1070, the eradication of Mexican American studies, the deaths in the desert on the U.S.-Mexico border, and to keep their communities together by resisting detention and deportation) sitting down at a table with funders who completely respect what they do, and want nothing more or different from them, is a unique experience. In the last minutes of the retreat, Kat Rodriguez from Coalición de Derechos Humanos said, “I’ve had to deal with ... grants, and that world is very foreign to me and it doesn’t feel comfortable, and now I know that it isn’t just that I didn’t know what was going on, but that it’s not how it should be. This feels like how these conversations should be happening.” For Hummingbird donors, our experience in Arizona and working with these organizers, and being part of the migrant and border justice movement has had a tremendous impact, transforming us as individuals and a collective of people in struggle.

“The Advance”

Cesar Lopez from Tierra y Libertad asked us to reframe the Hummingbird Retreat as an Advance, and that’s exactly how it felt. From the delegation to the retreat, and all the conversations in between, it’s been a deep process of learning and connection. Learning about social movements, about migrant justice struggles, about privilege and what it means to challenge it. Connecting to people we are funding as human beings, as organizers ourselves, and being seen and respected in our wholeness. This project fosters a kind of inter-dependence that is growing and shifting all of the time, as we continue to move forward with this collective funding model.

SEEDS OF COOPERATION AT THE FRONTLINES OF EMPIRE: ON THE GROUND IN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

- Kimber Heinz and Ali Issa, 2012 with a preface from 2023

Preface

In late 2012, we set out to write this essay as both an intervention into the literal business of war and a means to amplify liberatory work on the ground in US-occupied places. We wanted to demonstrate the ties between capitalism and empire, and to hold the U.S. accountable for both its military and economic approaches to war and occupation. We were working as organizers with a 100-year old organization, the War Resisters League, reflecting on the decade plus of the Global War on Terror and its impacts on the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as others surveilled, policed, held captive, and killed within and outside of U.S. borders. We also understood the profound need to uplift the personal, political, and economic agency of people living in places occupied militarily.

Through our present work as a public historian focused on twentieth-century U.S. radical internationalist histories (Kimber) and as the general coordinator of the Cooperative Economics Alliance of New York City (Ali), we continue to find resonances between what we wrote in this essay and our current moment in the Fall of 2023.

Since we submitted this piece, contexts have changed dramatically both in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the sectarianism and class division promoted by the U.S. and regional powers have remained powerful forces, preventing the kind of self-determined future that the labor organizing sketched below continues to fight for. The key recent moment of resistance to those forces of domination was the historic and massive protest movement sparked in October 2019 (featured in the brilliant documentary film *Baghdad on Fire*) against the entire Iraqi political class, as well as all forms of foreign and especially regional influence. This movement was led by poor and working-class—often feminist—Iraqis, demanding, “We want a homeland” (نريد وطن).” In Afghanistan, the U.S. withdrew its military forces in 2021 and the Taliban seized state power. Despite these complex dynamics impacting projects like Kandahar Treasure (described below), there have emerged since the troop withdrawal Afghan women-led grassroots efforts to resist the Taliban’s patriarchal rules, organized without the aid of outside forces.

In the coming months, we plan to write an updated introduction to this essay, in hopes that we can provide more context, analysis, and resources about some of the major

shifts over the past decade in global empire and militarism involving the US's role in Iraq and Afghanistan. We also hope to lift up more recent organizing and cultural production against empire, capitalist extraction, and authoritarianism in these two formerly US-occupied countries. Please stay tuned.

– Kimber & Ali, September 2023

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When people in the U.S.—or indeed most parts of the world—think of Afghanistan and Iraq, they often think of tragedy: the last decade has brought the longest U.S. war in history and another that has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands. But as these wars are “over” or “wrapping up,” we’re left to further examine what remains in these places, and, better yet, what foments, rises up, and grows anew. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, their economies have been seized by U.S. and international capitalist forces, in Afghanistan by way of “foreign aid” that is part of the U.S. “counterinsurgency strategy” there, and in Iraq by way of privatization. In both cases, capitalist models for economic development, the management of natural resources, and direct support for people living in war zones present the softer side of U.S. militarism, sometimes also attempting to legitimize U.S. military intervention itself. In Afghanistan, U.S. and international aid continues to be the way that the U.S. military hopes to win the “hearts and minds” of Afghan women who struggle to create their own visions for an economically sustainable future. In Iraq, a war fought for resource control and geostrategic advantage offered privatization as the best way to recover, but triggered instead a successful grassroots anti-privatization campaign. In this essay, we hope to demonstrate the ways that militarism and capitalism have mutually supported one another in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and also highlight two initiatives, one in each country, that challenge both militarism and capitalism at their intersection through practices of economic cooperation. We hope that these explorations will help people resisting capitalism link war and empire and also internationalize alternative models to capitalism.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, there are a number of reasons that the U.S. went to war, one of the principal reasons being the beginning of the Global War on Terror and the use of the tragic events of 9/11 as a pretext to send U.S. troops, weapons, and military aid all over the world. Afghanistan was the first stop of the war on terror and the Karzai government now in charge in Kabul was put in power by the U.S. after U.S. troops invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban in 2001. In addition to the U.S. objective to maintain its global military hegemony, particularly in Central Asia with its proximity to the oil-rich countries of Western Asia, the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan has made particular corporations and financial institutions rich(er) through private contracts with

the U.S. government related to the occupation of Afghan land and the takeover of the Afghan economy.

U.S. and international aid are a key part of this capitalist money-making strategy in Afghanistan. Although international aid is supposed to directly benefit the people living in war zones and somehow separate them from “the enemy,” aid funds from the U.S. government overseen by the State Department and USAID often go directly into the hands of U.S.-based and/or multinational private contractors. In a June 2011 report issued by the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, the committee found that, in Afghanistan, “More can still be done to reduce our reliance on contractors...more U.S. funding could be channeled to national Afghan civil society organizations instead of large, international contractors.” The report goes on to describe one story that is fairly emblematic of the way that U.S. aid rarely gets into the hands of the people living in U.S.-occupied places: “A New Jersey-based engineering consulting firm that accounted for over a third of USAID’s total contract obligations in Afghanistan between FY2007 and FY2009 (the Louis Berger Group, Inc.) recently admitted to submitting “false, fictitious, and fraudulent overhead rates for indirect costs...[resulting] in over-payments by the [U.S.] government in excess of \$10 million...” (1)

For the people of Afghanistan, there remains the underlying questions of who benefits from aid money and whether it will ever help them in their daily lives. According to Rangina Hamidi, an Afghan-American peace activist and small business owner who has spent her life split between living in the U.S. and Kandahar province in Afghanistan, “...even though many Afghans know that a lot of aid has come since the past eight years, because of the level of corruption, the people, in the very end, the people in the villages, the people in the small cities, have hardly seen any kind of difference in their lives from when the Taliban were in power to now.” (2)

One key reason that the majority of the people of Afghanistan have seen so little of this aid money is because, under the U.S.-NATO “counterinsurgency” strategy (COIN) in Afghanistan, aid money and “international support” for the Afghan economy is directly tied to the occupation and to a particular military strategy. The U.S. counterinsurgency strategy (COIN) in Afghanistan calls on the military to secure key areas—“clear” and “hold”—while USAID and its counterparts follow up with the “build” and “transfer” phases. U.S. and international aid to Afghanistan is inextricably bound up with militarism and the pursuit of empire. As a result, Afghans such as Rangina Hamidi have taken it upon themselves to find their own answers to living under and resisting occupation and to seek alternatives to the international aid that both provides for the private takeover of Afghanistan’s economy and legitimizes occupation.

When Hamidi first returned to Afghanistan in 2003 following her years in Pakistan and in the U.S. after her family’s escape from Afghanistan in 1981 (following the Soviet military invasion and the beginning of the U.S. proxy war with the Soviet Union), she

started working in the international nonprofit sector and learned much about the role of aid in supporting occupation. Hamidi worked with Afghans for Civil Society (ACS), a nonprofit group in Afghanistan founded by a U.S. businessman from Baltimore, Maryland. It is part of ACS's mission to "address critical needs" in Afghanistan "while simultaneously instilling community ownership of the reconstruction process [and] providing means for implementing a democratic society." One substantial effort hosted by ACS was a conference in Kandahar on women's rights. The conference concluded with the founding of an "Afghan Women's Bill of Rights," which was lauded soon after by a *New York Times* editorial as "an extraordinary document" promoting the development of Afghanistan. (3) The event was co-sponsored by the Kabul and New York City-based organization, Women for Afghan Women, a group that publicly supports the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S.-NATO occupation. (4)

Even when operating with the best of intentions, the international and nonprofit aid community in Afghanistan is deeply flawed in its efforts to promote true democracy and self-determination for Afghans. On the one hand, acting as the sometimes only source of financial support for people who have had their lives and livelihoods severely altered or destroyed by war and militarism while, on the other, serving as a conduit for the justification of continued occupation, occupied peoples sometimes feel caught between a rock and a hard place. Many aid organizations only fund projects that are in line with Western visions of democracy. Projects such as an "Afghan Women's Bill of Rights" may be a source of real inspiration to the group of women who worked together on it, but may also be used by organizations and the U.S. government and mainstream media to convince people living here that U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan is good for Afghans. One of the central myths perpetuated by the U.S. government immediately following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was that the U.S. had to be there to defend Afghan women from the Taliban. As most antimilitarist activists and journalists who have been following the effects of the war on Afghans could tell you, no average person in Afghanistan has it any easier as a result of the drone strikes, night raids, and disappearances that are part and parcel of the occupation, nor have Afghan women come to have many more freedoms under an Afghan government of U.S.-backed warlords who view women's role in society in much the same way as the Taliban—but these stories rarely make their way into the pages of the *New York Times*.

Because many Afghans recognize that reliance on aid is also an implicit reliance on militarism to meet people's basic needs and to establish systems of governance, they look for an alternative social and economic system where they can draw on their own history, culture, and experiences to create something that will help them meet their needs and challenge their oppressors, both foreign and internal. For Rangina Hamidi, the answer was small business—a business founded not through international micro-credit or a continued reliance on aid, but one that has used aid as the start-up capital needed to become a self-sustaining project that supports the families of the more than 450 Afghan women whom her project employs. The business that Hamidi started is Kandahar Treasure, an embroidery project that employs women living in Kandahar

province, one of the central fronts of the U.S. occupation: “If Kandahar falls, so goes Afghanistan. Everyone understands that it’s a jewel that needs to be protected,” said U.S. Army Lt. Col. Reik Andersen, commander of the 1st Battalion of the 12th Infantry Regiment, following the 2009 U.S. troop surge in Afghanistan. (5)

The women employees of Kandahar Treasure work at home to make pieces of traditional southern Afghan embroidery, called Khamak (pronounced kha-mahk) that are placed for sale on the international market, centrally in the U.S., Canada, and Afghanistan. The women are paid directly for each embroidered piece that they finish and there are no strings attached to payment. Kandahar Treasure was started with a \$55,000 seed grant from USAID to ACS, one of the limited times that Kandahar Treasure has been supported by funds from the international aid community. It has been Hamidi’s goal upon founding the project to be totally self-sufficient, and she does not accept any form of microcredit or foreign assistance: “I am against a ‘beggar economy,’” says Hamidi. “We should not be given more money, but create an economy that will be sustainable.” (6)

In addition to providing a means of economic stability for Afghan women and families who rarely see the aid money that comes through governments and international nonprofits, Hamidi believes that Kandahar Treasure gives women power within their families and within traditional Afghan culture:

“When a woman earns, it gives her power beyond our understanding and imagination. Women are always a liability here...every aspect of their lives has to be taken care of by a man figure in the household. And, so now, with women having the ability to earn money, at home even, they now have the opportunity to become an asset to the family. Indirectly, we’re also changing the social dynamics of the society, and that is an important step to changing women’s rights and women’s social reality in the country that we’re working in.” (7)

Kandahar Treasure seeks to liberate Afghan women in the context of the culture in which they live. “Kandahar Treasure respects the fact that women in Kandahar live in a very strict cultural, traditional conservative society,” says Hamidi. “Almost all the women we work with in our business don’t have the permission to leave their home to work. So, realizing this fact, we decided that we would go to their homes rather than ask them to come to a production site.” (8) It may be difficult for many people living in the U.S. to imagine what it is like to live in a society or culture that so strictly limits the basic freedoms of women. But while it is crucial for people living in the U.S. to support Afghan women’s efforts to liberate themselves, we must recognize that is not our place to dictate the terms of their liberation. Kandahar Treasure provides an opportunity for women in Kandahar to make a living without leaving their home or violating other laws that may directly endanger them while centering Afghan women as the key players in economic, social, and cultural change. Employees of Kandahar Treasure are able to

financially provide for their families in ways that they hadn't previously been able to do under laws imposed by both the Taliban and the U.S.-backed Karzai regime. This has enabled them to leverage decision-making power at home and at the local level.

Situated in a war zone, Kandahar Treasure, through a small business model of grassroots economics, provides one model for a democratically-minded sustainable economy created by and for Afghans—Afghan women in particular. This provides an alternative to Western-influenced economic development models that prop up modern-day warfare and imperialism. Although small business is ostensibly a part of capitalist systems, initiatives such as Kandahar Treasure which prioritize workers and their communities in the spirit of worker cooperation for the benefit of everyone in a society contest a cornerstone of capitalism—that which favors an owning class over those who do a majority of the work.

Furthermore, because capitalism is so intertwined with militarism in Afghanistan, small business projects like Kandahar Treasure also challenge the fabric of U.S. militarism and the tenuous ground that occupation stands on. These business projects put Afghans at the center of the Afghan economy and take power out of the hands of those who are given control during an occupation—corrupt politicians, military contractors, and international nonprofits and aid organizations. Giving Afghans control over their own economy also limits the ways in which international corporations and financial institutions can profit off of war-making and disrupts the narrative that Afghans need external guidance in order to provide for their own communities. In addition, the fact that Kandahar Treasure raises the economic standing of women in Kandahar and helps Afghan women leverage more power in their families and communities disrupts the key U.S. war narrative that the U.S. must occupy a given country in order to “liberate” the women living there. (9)

This doesn't mean that Afghans don't need international solidarity to achieve their liberation and self-determination. After 10 years of the U.S.-NATO war, the economy of Afghanistan has been plunged into quagmire and the people of Afghanistan need reparations for what has been taken from them, with financial compensation from formerly occupying nations as a crucial second step, the first being a responsible end to the occupation. But outside support does not mean external control, and the people of the U.S. can and should act in solidarity with Afghans to call for an immediate end to the U.S.-NATO occupation and the permanent removal of all U.S. and multinational corporations and military contractors from Afghanistan.

Iraq

The documentation proving that the prize of Iraqi oil was a central motivation for the 2003 invasion of Iraq—and the crushing sanctions that preceded it—is in most circles no longer necessary to catalog. It is perhaps best summed up by the 2007 quote from

former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan: “I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil” (10), and the leaked documents from October 2002 between British officials and British Petroleum (BP), which read: “We were determined to get a fair slice of the action for UK companies in post-Saddam Iraq.” (11)

What the U.S., its allies and multinational corporations stood to gain from greater access to Iraq’s oil and natural gas wealth (which some predict to be greater than Saudi Arabia’s) was not so much that they would *own* that wealth (although with some of the contracts negotiated by oil giants such as ExxonMobil, the amount of profit rivals that of standard private ownership), but that they would have the ability to *channel* it, when needed, and so increase the amount of oil produced globally, allowing for a huge amount of control of the economy worldwide. This then brings us from the realm of pure resource extraction to the subtler one of political hegemony. Iraq’s constitution, written by those with direct ties to those companies that would benefit from a new global carbon arrangement, is important to understanding how political control over Iraq was to be achieved, and what the resistance to it has looked like. Iraq’s 2003 constitution divided Iraqis based on Islamic sect and ethnicity and enshrined that division into Iraq’s central institutions, virtually ensuring a narrow, competitive political landscape that would by definition be unresponsive to broad demands by mass movements across Iraqi society.

Following the U.S. invasion, the privatization of Iraq’s oil industry (which had been nationalized since 1972) and its possible dramatic expansion to include untapped oil lying beneath Iraq’s soil, promised massive increases in revenue for the Iraqi government and the oil corporations to which it envisioned granting lucrative deals. Whether this increased revenue would improve the lives of everyday Iraqis already reeling from past and present wars and the U.S.-imposed sanctions was not much of a concern for those making Iraq’s economic future. However this was certainly on the minds of those whose labor was essential to this new Iraq: its oil workers and union leaders, who understood that the revenue would most likely not be directed towards Iraq’s ailing infrastructure, nor would it even necessarily provide or secure much-needed jobs (Iraq’s unemployment has hovered, by the most conservative estimates, around 18% since 2005.). (12)

Public feeling that the fate of Iraq’s oil would also be closely related to Iraq’s political future was also on the minds of those same oil workers, whose struggles over the meaning of the land’s resources, and their ultimately shared nature, were not forgotten in the midst of Iraq’s profound traumas since the early 1980s. Enter the struggle over Iraq’s “Oil Law” (alternatively known as the “Hydrocarbon Law.”) In this story, there are many lessons for how capitalism functions globally, and the hints of what resisting it means in some of the most difficult circumstances imaginable—war and occupation.

Our story begins in 1987 when Saddam Hussein pushed through an order banning independent Iraqi labor unions in the public sector—undermining a tradition of organizing in Iraq that stretched back to the 1940s. Flashing forward to July 2003, Paul Bremer—then occupation overseer—maintained Saddam’s ban for the newly occupied Iraq. Later revealing further disdain for the unions, which had begun forming despite the ban, the Iraqi government in August 2005 passed “Decree 8750,” allowing the state to seize union funds at any time. Finally, in February 2007, a proposed Oil Law was submitted by Oil Minister Husayn al-Shahristani to the Iraqi Parliament. Leaked versions of the law provoked controversy among many Iraqi politicians, resulting in several changes in form, but the central dramatic shift remained: much of Iraq’s oil would be under new “production-sharing agreements” that would allow 15-30 years of unfettered operational control over Iraq’s oil facilities to the multinationals that won contract bidding. Crucially, these arrangements were justified as necessary to attract investment and get Iraq’s economy “back on its feet,” considering how dangerous Iraq had become since the occupation (which it indeed had). The beneficiaries of this proposed global economic system—the oil giants and their associated governments—were the very same that had envisioned Iraq’s invasion and created the conditions for unprecedented levels of violence.

The organized campaign against the Oil Law actually began earlier, in December of 2006, when several important federations of unions met in Jordan. Among them was the 26,000 member strong Federation of Iraqi Oil Unions, closely tied to the nationally-owned Southern Oil Company in Basra, which had many strong allies across Iraqi labor sectors. Unions from across ideological divides agreed on tactical alliances, which meant that formations calling for worker self-management, like the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq, focused on the immediate goal of stopping the Oil Law, seeing this as the moment to speak to a key national issue. The strategy of the campaign was simple: unlock the cross-class, intergenerational, anti-sectarian potential of ordinary Iraqis’ desire for economic sovereignty and their disgust with an executive branch widely seen as deeply complicit in Iraq’s sectarian violence. Its tactics relied on public demonstrations, conferences, petitions, and, most crucially, what workers were best positioned to do: strikes and industrial sabotage. (13)

The campaign, while facing severe repression (with some of its leaders jailed or even killed by the Iraqi authorities), gained momentum throughout 2007. According to one of the leaders of the Federation of Oil Iraqi Unions, Jamal Jum’a, in May 2007:

“The oil law does not represent the aspirations of the Iraqi people [. . .] It will let the foreign oil companies into the oil sector and enact privatization under so-called production-sharing agreements. The federation calls on all unions in the world to support our demands and to put pressure on governments and the oil companies not to enter the Iraqi oil fields.” (14)

At the same time, the force of this movement, in addition to in-fighting over which Iraqi elites would benefit more, began to affect those in Iraq's slightly more accountable Parliament. So much so that even *The New York Times*, which had parroted many of the arguments about the benefits of the law, was forced to admit (in sectarian language about "Sunni opposition") that its chances of passing were dwindling:

"[Saleem Abdullah, Iraqi legislator] said Sunni Arabs were also worried that the law would give foreign companies too large a role in the country's oil industry. Sunni Arab political leaders supported cabinet approval of the draft law, but appear ambivalent now." (15)

Tabled over and over and mired in committees, the Oil Law never gained enough backing in the Iraqi Parliament and faded as an issue, as talk about U.S. crimes against civilians and imposing a withdrawal timetable began to dominate, while the semi-autonomous Iraqi-Kurdistan government resorted to direct deals with multinationals that sidestepped sanctioned legalization.

This remarkable victory still persists into 2012 (though a weakened Oil Law was rammed through the Parliament in late 2011). What this means is that though contracts with oil giants were finally signed, they could still be declared illegal by the Iraqi Parliament, with the specter of future mobilizations for Iraqi economic sovereignty never too far away.

Conclusion

What the above case studies centered around Kandahar and Basra demonstrate, more than the interdependence of capitalism and militarism, is the potential for peoples under occupation—those facing the full thrust of empire's arsenal—to imagine and act collectively and to begin to build their own economic destinies. To be sure, these are small victories and organizing efforts that are far from utopian, as both a small business that caters to an international clientele and labor unions that depend on global oil sales remain reliant on capitalism to survive. But worker solidarity and the creation of models that put people and economic sovereignty before profit and political gain strike at the heart of capitalism, which relies upon the division of workers—of people from one another—to exist.

Militarism similarly relies upon acts of division, dispersal, and extermination and separates people who might otherwise have an interest in a common well-being for all communities, such as in the case of giving aid centrally to those groups who support a continued U.S.-NATO occupation of Afghanistan or the U.S. government's playing up and helping institutionalize ethnic and sectarian lines in Iraq. In that sense, solidarity economy efforts in places occupied by the U.S. also take aim at militarism when they bring people together across divisions—both real and constructed. (16) As the

intersection of capitalism and militarism makes up the core of U.S. empire, we hope that groups and organizations resisting capitalism, including co-ops, collectives, and unions that exist globally, will take note of the relationship between imperialism and our globalized economy. U.S. anti-capitalists must prioritize building solidarity with communities resisting both U.S. militarism and its softer economic side to nurture cooperation at the frontlines of empire.

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Notes

Thank you much for your insights and feedback on this piece to: Anand Gopal, Seelai Karzai, and Zahra Ali.

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THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE: WHY WE WANT OUR NYC FOOD COOP TO BOYCOTT ISRAELI APARTHEID - Melissa Morrone and Tara Tabassi, 2013, with updated endnote by Jan Clausen and Morgan Võ

Pro-Palestinian members of The Park Slope Food Coop are currently waging a vigorous campaign to institute a boycott of Israeli products, a new iteration of the earlier efforts detailed in the following essay. An end note from current organizers describes this and other developments since the initial surge of BDS activism in 2012.

It's early 2013. We're in a packed Brooklyn middle school auditorium on a Tuesday night, in the middle of a Park Slope Food Coop membership meeting. The main topic under discussion is Palestine and Israel, and whether the Coop should implement policies that would stifle conversation and proposals related to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel. Some members express general frustration over this sort of politicized subject at the Coop. One older member takes the mic. The Coop is a political place, and it always has been, he proclaims to the crowd. And if you're new here, he adds, "Catch up!"

This is a story about our continuing campaign to have our cooperative grocery store join the global BDS movement against Israeli Apartheid. But it is also a story about Brooklyn, about the politics of cooperation, and about the complexities of building community across borders by recognizing the potential of people power within globalized capitalist economies.

The boycott tactic as a non-violent tool for social change has a long history, encompassing the Indian "Swadeshi" boycott of British goods in the early 1900s; the 1950s Montgomery bus boycott; the California grape boycott of the 1960s; and the infamous boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaign against Apartheid-era South Africa that picked up steam through the late 20th century. Boycotts can be used to pressure businesses and governments alike.

Today, boycotting is also a consumer-activist way of engaging with Israel. In 2005, over 170 organizations and associations representing Palestinian civil society put out a call asking the international community to join a global effort for boycott, divestment, and sanctions against the state of Israel until three conditions are met: the end of the occupation of all Arab lands, equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the right of return for all Palestinian refugees (Palestinian National BDS Committee, 2005).

Joining the BDS movement is a conversation of sorts to Israel that says, “We ask you, as a community, to abide by international law and human rights, and to abide by your own professed democratic principles.” It is impossible to send this message by individually, passively refusing to buy Israeli goods. As former Olympia Food Co-op and current Park Slope Food Coop member Phan Nguyen explains:

“When individual consumers simply refuse to purchase a product out of ethical concerns, it doesn’t necessarily transmit a message to the producer. Unfortunately, the idea of changing the world through one’s own shopping habits is popular these days in Western consumer society. Collectively boycotting Israeli-produced hummus, on the other hand, is ridiculed as ‘symbolic,’ as if the goal were to punish hummus. Wrong. It is through our deliberate interactions with these Israeli ‘symbols’ that we have found the leverage to engage with the Israeli government” (personal communication, February 22, 2013).

Boycotting and alternative food systems are generally *not* about a break with capitalism. Boycotts rely on capitalism, or at least a preservation of existing economic structures, to execute this tactic. In the same vein, food coops, operating within the market system, at their core are limited in the radical change they can effect in their locales.

But BDS is a way of working within capitalism to create pressure. Ordinary people can confront Israel’s militarized colonial projects with something as “simple” as a refusal to buy Sabra hummus, Born Free baby bottles, or SodaStream seltzer makers. Of course, it isn’t this simple. Boycotting in general and BDS in particular is not about individual consumer choices; it’s about collective action under the auspices of a global movement, and ideally that action is seen as threatening by those in power. In our efforts to start a boycott campaign against Israel at the Coop, we challenged the status quo that says that Israel should be supported by people in the U.S., and that the Coop is just a great place to get healthy food at good prices.

Our approach to BDS activism at the Coop is that we are U.S. residents recognizing our interdependence with people around the planet. We are New Yorkers who believe in the power of international solidarity. We are Coop members who care not only about Palestine but also about oppressions that affect us in our neighborhoods and in the Coop itself. We are taxpayers whose money is being funneled to objectionable projects, including military aid to Israel. We see our participation in BDS as being linked with resistance to economic injustice, state violence, and corporate greed of all stripes.

Our location is an important factor in how our work proceeded. The borough of Brooklyn has been “hot” for years now, with gentrification permeating many neighborhoods. A 2001 article about the Coop noted, “The neighborhoods [of Park Slope and its surroundings] have changed rapidly in the last twenty-five years from

quiet, mostly Catholic working-class enclaves to eclectic, largely gay havens for artists and students, and more recently, to a fashionable outpost of Manhattan where many prosperous young professionals have chosen to rear their children” (Jochowitz, 2001, p. 56). And it’s gotten only more “fashionable”, “prosperous,” and whiter, since then. Navigating issues of displacement, class, race, religion, identity, and NYC-authenticity is part of life in Brooklyn as well as being a Coop member.

The Coop, in the heart of gentrified Park Slope, was founded in 1973 by a politicized group of people interested in creating alternative structures in order to collectively access healthy local food in an affordable way. This was an era when many people starting food cooperatives “believed they were the seers of American capitalism’s dying days [...] and the founders of a liberating and righteous cultural and economic substitute” (McGrath, 2004, p. 3). Since its modest beginnings, our cooperative now has over 16,000 members, each of whom is a member-owner—buying into the Coop as an investor, as well as working a monthly shift in exchange for a 20-40% discount.

The Coop has long occupied a relatively significant place in the Brooklyn and even NYC psyche. There are competing narratives: Is it about judgmental bearded hippies in overalls? Or is it yuppies who make their nannies do their work slots? Or New Age-y types with their many varieties of non-dairy milks and ear candles? And now we have the infamous dichotomy of Zionist elder white folks versus BDS multi-culti activists.

Long-time members point out that the Coop is now far more diverse, racially and otherwise, than it was in the past. While today’s Coop demographics dip into multiple classes, races, religions, genders, and sexual identities much more than at its founding, those who take up decision-making space are not necessarily representative of the membership as a whole. This stark reality is apparent when gazing at the wall of pictures of the paid staff, the Coordinators: the faces of white elders are in the top tiers of the management, with the lower ranks more proportionately filled with people of color. For some, the workings of systemic oppression are experienced daily within the Coop doors. For the others, it’s simply an organic shopping haven.

An exponential increase in the number of people who have joined the Coop, coupled with a general trend towards adoption of “eco” and “green” lifestyles stripped of most analysis of systemic injustice, means that it can be an uphill battle even to convince members that a political question is relevant to Coop operations. We join and stay at the Coop for different reasons. We come from different places and sometimes competing spaces, though there is at least a shared commitment to food and health, to saving money and engaging in alternative models within capitalism (even if the political awareness is not always there), and to a desire for what we eat to be sourced sustainably and with conscience. Because of these common grounds, our Coop is a crucial environment in which to plant the seeds of the expanding BDS movement against Israel’s abuses.

Theoretically, the Coop emphasizes standing together as a cohesive community in support of environmental respect, human rights, food justice, and positive global interdependence. Particularly relevant to those interested in BDS and implementing the corresponding policy change is a passage in the Coop's very own Mission Statement: "We seek to avoid products that depend on the exploitation of others. [...] We are committed to diversity and equality. We oppose discrimination in any form. We strive to make the Coop welcoming and accessible to all and to respect the opinions, needs and concerns of every member. We seek to maximize participation at every level, from policy making to running the store" (Park Slope Food Coop, n.d.).

In addition to the specificity of a campaign in support of Palestinians' rights, having an explicitly political campaign appealed to us because it helps combat the idea that the Coop is merely a place to get good inexpensive produce and cheese. As the Coop membership has grown rapidly over the last decade, so has a certain depoliticization. But despite claims otherwise, the Coop is an explicitly political space, from the large "No Fracking" sign taped on the window facing busy Union Street, to the long and commendable history of using its buying power to strengthen national and international boycotts. From its founding, the Coop observed the South African boycott to end Apartheid, more than a decade before the tactic gained popularity in the U.S. In the 1980s and '90s, we boycotted Scott, Libby (Nestle), and Campbell (Pepperidge Farms) products, joined boycotts in support of United Farm Workers, and we boycotted all Chilean products during its dictatorship.

Since the 2000s, the membership regularly votes overwhelmingly to continue boycotting Coca Cola and its subsidiaries, such as Odwalla. We voted to ban bottled water and plastic bags, and in 2010 were the first grocery store in Park Slope to boycott Brooklyn-based Flaum Appetizing for union-busting and workers' rights violations. Back issues of the twice-monthly newspaper, the Coop Linewaiters' Gazette, include numerous articles about labor struggles and product boycotts (though whether the Coop as a whole should be involved in social justice was heavily questioned in the early '80s as it pertained to housing and gentrification). The Coop has always been a political body, carefully choosing what should and should not enter our cooperative doors.

Strategically speaking, BDS campaigns within food cooperatives make sense. Food coops are political institutions, founded and nourished by larger movements for economic, environmental, and social justice — despite their questionable relationship with capitalism, as noted above. While the Coop has a significant political history of engaging in consumer boycotts, we are not alone in attempting a BDS campaign within a food cooperative. Proposals to join BDS have occurred in cooperatives in Washington, California and Michigan, though most were eventually voted down by boards or, in one case, refused due to "policy-violations."

The most notable, however, is the Olympia Food Co-op, which made the historic decision to de-shelve Israeli products in 2010, marking itself as the first U.S. grocery store to sign onto BDS. This action came after a long community effort of educational workshops, street art and media highlighting the violent realities of Israeli Apartheid, and dialogue among community members. While this BDS victory was celebrated in Olympia as well as in Palestine, Brooklyn, and elsewhere, the backlash felt by the board and staff in Olympia was hefty, starting with aggressive emails and phone calls and later developing into a full lawsuit against the board of directors. Olympia's decision also spurred mainstream Jewish organizations in the U.S. to pledge \$6 million to fight national BDS efforts. Olympia Food Co-op's campaign and the reaction to it, particularly from high-level Israeli government officials, only shines light on the significance and effectiveness of joining a movement that in food coops manifests as de-shelving only a few Israeli items.

The Park Slope Food Coop BDS campaign started in January 2009, during the horror of Operation Cast Lead, when a member named Hima mentioned BDS during a General Meeting (GM). In October 2010, this incarnation of activists coalesced to work together on building a BDS campaign. During the most mobilized periods, we were 20 or so active organizers with around 200 friends and allies with whom we were in touch.

From the start, we considered a membership-wide referendum as the most democratic and effective method to decide on BDS. Throughout Coop history, in-person voting during the GM has been the fundamental way to make decisions. There is, however, precedent for membership-wide referenda on particularly charged proposals, such as whether the Coop should carry meat. We felt that conducting a vote on BDS at the GM would provide adequate time for each member to research, deliberate and cast a private vote, thus obtaining the most representative results. Even the best-attended GM comes out to less than 5% of the total membership. Besides, the reality is that the demographic who generally attends GMs does not reflect the wider membership, as it is either those who feel politically invested in a particular issue, those going just to get work credit, or the same small group of people committed to Coop operations, who are able to attend hours of meeting on a weeknight.

Whether or not to have a referendum would itself have to be first voted on at a GM. In February 2011, we submitted a proposal that read, "We call for a referendum to participate in the global nonviolent Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel's violations of international law and human rights." By the following month, an organized opposition to our effort had formed online and via letters — often vitriolic, including tarring BDS supporters as anti-Semites — in the *Linewaiters' Gazette* signed by members calling themselves "More Hummus Please" (fittingly, hummus is a prominent example of Israeli cultural appropriation of traditionally Palestinian foods). Joe Holtz, a founding Coop member and one of the General Coordinators, spoke out multiple times against a referendum on BDS. His final plea was for people to "Vote

Coop,” meaning that anyone who was concerned about the Coop’s future should vote *no* on the referendum proposal. (This formulation is an echo of how Olympia organizers were attacked as outside agitators who didn’t care about their Coop.) It was a reminder that Palestine solidarity activists must continually assert ourselves as part of our communities.

At our Coop, we engaged in a number of tactics and activities. We wrote many letters to the *Linewaiters’ Gazette*, both to describe abuses faced by Palestinians and the value of joining the BDS movement, and to respond to specific anti-BDS arguments made by Coop members and staff. We held several events in the Coop’s community meeting room (accessible to non-members as well), including film screenings and discussions led by activists and writers on topics such as Gaza in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead, food justice in Israel-Palestine, discrimination in Hebron, and the plight of the Bedouins in the Negev. We staged weekly, sometimes daily, flyering sessions in front of the Coop to chat with fellow members and pass out information about BDS and the referendum proposal, where we were met with interest, expressions of solidarity, indifference, hostility, and physical violence.

We also used social media to spread the news about the vote and the wider BDS movement. On Twitter, we had a tweet series in the voices of members, to show that BDS supporters were just as much a part of the Coop as anyone: “I’m the one shopping with my baby,” or “I’m the one buying two bunches of kale,” along with encouragement to vote yes to a BDS referendum at the upcoming GM. On Facebook, we posted photos of members holding signs expressing their desire to see peace and justice in Palestine, and vote at the GM.

The big vote took place in the March 2012 GM at Brooklyn Technical High School to accommodate around 2000 people. The final tally was 1005 against and 653 in favor of a BDS referendum (not necessarily in favor of BDS *per se*).

Since the stress and excitement of the vote, we have continued to organize, albeit on a much smaller scale. The Coop’s newspaper is still a site of discussion and argument about Israel, Palestine and BDS. In June 2012, we tussled with Coop staff when they accepted and then canceled a proposal for a “Zionist pinkwashing at home and abroad” event, on the grounds that it would criticize another community organization (NYC’s LGBT Center), thus violating the cooperative principles on which the Coop intends to operate. Our website is a source of information about Israeli products that the Coop carries. In a broader context, we are regarded as an active part of the constellation of New York City Palestine solidarity groups — for example, invited to endorse statements and events.

How did our actions fit into Brooklyn and the rest of the city? Even when Hima first brought up the subject of BDS, without any particular proposal, back in 2009, an

explosion of attention followed. The combination of the Park Slope Food Coop and an anti-Israel initiative was irresistible to local and international media. Some illustrative headlines: “Soy Vey! Could a Hummus Fight Kill the Co-op?” (New York Observer, 8/3/11), “Members Of This Trendy Brooklyn Food Co-op Are Considering A Ban On Israeli Products” (Business Insider, 2/23/12), and “Goy-cott in Park Slope” (New York Post, 8/25/11). The bizarre apex of the media attention was when we were invited to be part of a “Daily Show” segment with Samantha Bee.

As part of our campaign, we amassed statements of support written and/or signed by two dozen international people and organizations, including Alice Walker, Mustafa Barghouthi, Boycott from Within, Jewish Voice for Peace, Brooklyn For Peace, CodePink, and the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation. But on the other side, the strongly Zionist character of mainstream New York City made its presence clear. Many politicians (including otherwise progressive City Council members, such as Brad Lander and Leticia James) made statements against our campaign and called it anti-Semitic, among other smears.

Most notable in this group was Mayor Michael Bloomberg himself, who was quoted in a New York Times article accusing BDS advocates of wanting “Israel to be torn apart and everybody to be massacred” (Grynbaum, 2012). (Interestingly, Bloomberg used very different rhetoric during the hullabaloo about a February 2013 talk on BDS at Brooklyn College by U.S. scholar Judith Butler and Palestinian academic and activist Omar Barghouti; this time, he reiterated his abhorrence to BDS but, in the name of academic freedom, criticized those who would silence Butler and Barghouti. Evidently he had not seen a food coop as being in the same principled league, although the Coop was important enough for him to make that vicious public statement.) Indeed, it seems that our Coop campaign was the catalyst for developing a high-level anti-BDS infrastructure in NYC, as Nguyen has detailed (2013). New York City’s opposition to BDS is so strong that “even seasoned activists can become quickly overwhelmed by the attacks and lies propagated by the opposition,” says Nguyen (personal communication, February 22, 2013). In general, he recommends that activists new to BDS consult with folks who have achieved local success.

In some circles, talk of the well-known BDS campaign at the Coop is that we “failed” because we lost the 2012 vote for a referendum. While we lost the opportunity to hear what the entire membership thought about BDS, this process was not a failure. BDS is a long-term, international movement whose local victories will seem small until it is a normalized approach to justice across our globe. As solidarity activists, we saw victory when BDS became a topic of conversation in the Coop, when we created momentum for community members to dialogue, and when more Brooklynites became aware of the experiences of living within occupied Palestine. We saw victory in the mass media coverage of our campaign, even when it was ugly, because entering New Yorkers’

consciousness at that level meant that we were succeeding in pushing the conversation about Israel's oppression of Palestinians into the mainstream discourse.

We see victory as we use the tactic of BDS as a crowbar to keep our cooperative grocery store open as a political space where we talk about human rights, U.S. complicity in Israeli Apartheid, and international solidarity. We retain our vision of making radical change happen from a place where people buy granola and kale. We Park Slope Food Coop members for BDS remain committed to promoting BDS as a nonviolent people-power tactic. Whether it's genetically-modified corn, bottled water, or apartheid — whether South African or Israeli — our Coop is a place where we are able to assert that enough is enough.

Endnote

Melissa Morrone's and Tara Tabassi's excellent essay was written more than a decade ago. In the intervening years, PSFC Members for BDS (PSFC-BDS) continued to agitate, albeit at a far lower level of intensity. Eventually, the group dwindled to about half a dozen. Following the events of October 7, 2023, a large, energetic new contingent came together in what is now called PSFC Members for Palestine. We two are active with this initiative, Jan as a holdover from the old group. We will briefly sketch the post-2012 history before describing the current state of a boldly reinvigorated campaign.

In 2015, PSFC-BDS put forward a proposal for a targeted boycott of an especially problematic item, SodaStream sparkling water dispensers. After several Zionist members disrupted a presentation of the proposal at a monthly General Meeting (GM) later that year, the Coop's General Coordinators (GCs) claimed they could not find a large enough meeting space to hold the anticipated vote on the measure. Requests to vote using mail-in paper ballots or electronic methods were stymied using the bureaucratic and procedural resources at the disposal of the Coop's paid staff.

Every effort was made to "close the loopholes" of democratic opportunity that this essay so valuably describes as a positive feature of the Coop's contradictory social space. In 2016, a Zionist Coop member successfully campaigned to override the traditional simple majority threshold for passing new measures, requiring a 75% supermajority to approve any boycott. The GCs arbitrarily banned holding programs related to Palestine, Israel, or BDS in the Coop's meeting space; the Coop newspaper increasingly censored BDS-related material. The initial stages of the covid pandemic disrupted business as usual, further constraining opportunities to interact freely with the membership.

Yet PSFC-BDS continued to agitate, distributing fliers and talking to members outside the Coop, particularly at times when the urgency of freedom for Palestine vaulted into the headlines, as during the Great March of Return in 2018. Beyond the PSFC-BDS

group, there were other important campaigns for democracy and justice within the Coop, including an effort at unionization by non-supervisory paid staff that was defeated using what one activist called “classic union-busting tactics.” During the period of intense protests following George Floyd’s murder in 2020, members once again forcefully raised demands that the Coop do more to combat racism, a concern that has simmered for decades. Clearly, the fight for democratic participation at the Coop was not dead when the events of October 7, 2023 helped spur renewed calls for a boycott of Israeli products.

On the one hand, PSFC Members for Palestine now faces many of the same tactics (as well as the same individuals) who forcefully opposed BDS at the Coop in 2012, and who now have additional anti-democratic tools, such as the supermajority rule, at their disposal. On the other, the new group draws on an amazing amount of talent and dedication, imaginative and diverse approaches, a groundswell of public indignation at Israel’s atrocities, and the sense of a generational shift in the recognition of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.

Amidst the ever-worsening genocide of Palestinians, where do we find optimism? Reading Morrone and Tabassi’s descriptions of conversations had over 10 years ago, their recollections echo some of our own experiences with fellow members today. When we canvass the line outside the Coop, we regularly hear members assert that the Coop is not a political space. Yet, in the urgency of this moment, we find such members are more open to a genuine conversation about why the Park Slope Food Coop is a political space, why it is not only appropriate but in fact necessary to hold accountable companies that are complicit in the Israeli systems of oppression, why it is time to draw a line and refuse our cooperation. And conversely, our canvassers are regularly met with a sigh of relief, “Ah, I’ve been looking for you all! How can I contribute?”

There is no doubt that passing a boycott of Israeli products at the Park Slope Food Coop remains a challenging fight. Yet there are clear signs that the tides are turning, that our fellow members are rightly questioning our roles in the horror unfolding before us, and that, as a community engaged in cooperation, an appreciation for our moral responsibility and imperative to act is rising.

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BREAKING IT DOWN: HOW COST-SHARING CONFRONTS SCARCITY, SECRECY & SHAME ABOUT MONEY - Nico Amador, 2012

Let's face it – talking about money is uncomfortable for most of us. In my experience, the fear of stigma or shame associated with a class position is something that is shared by people who have wealth and people who don't.

I'll admit that this is something that I too am still learning how to navigate as an activist from a middle class background. While “middle class” may be a murky classification in U.S. culture, where class definitions are not always transparent or well-defined, I'm using that term in reference to having grown up in a family where both my parents were public school teachers with stable jobs but were the first people in their family to go to college; they both put themselves through school without additional support or inherited wealth.

For much of my career, I didn't make much money but I had all the benefits of growing up with financial stability, formal education, and a high quality of life – including things like having health care, the ability to travel and take vacations, and options to continue advancing in my chosen lines of work. That doesn't feel like a particularly difficult confession, but as I'm sure others experience, in the course of building community across class differences, it's not always clear how to create open dialogue about these differences or how they might impact our way of relating to each other. With each friend, lover, or comrade, it can feel as though there's much at stake, as though there's a balance that might be disrupted if we're *too* honest, if our class differences become too distinct. As we're building relationships across class differences, middle class and owning class people may not want our class indicators outed. Either we think they'd make others feel alienated or we fear the judgments attached to them. We don't want to be misread. Poor and working class people might also have reasons for holding back what they share about their own backgrounds, especially in situations where they may expect bias or stigmatization from others with more class privilege.

But what happens when we avoid getting real with each other?

When I was about nineteen I was just coming into my political consciousness and my life as an organizer. A big piece of that process was learning to claim my identity as a person of color and finding connection with other young Latinx folks. I wanted to belong, and as someone who was queer, mixed-race, and not very fluent in Spanish, I was already worried that I didn't. Most of my college friends were first generation students from poor and working class immigrant families, mostly from Los Angeles and the farming communities in Central California. I could tell that my suburban, middle

class upbringing set me even further apart from being able to relate to my friends and a cultural experience I wanted desperately to get closer to. Somewhat unconsciously, I started to downplay things about myself that would have made my class background more apparent. I didn't lie but I did keep quiet about certain aspects of my upbringing. In an environment that was so focused on the politics of racial and economic justice, I wanted to be seen as firmly on the side of "the people." I didn't yet believe I could be honest about my class privilege and still be seen that way. I was sure it would compromise the acceptance I'd found among peers who'd become very dear to me.

Those differences were there anyway, of course. I'm certain that most of my friends sensed it and that at times the obvious was made more awkward by my lack of acknowledgement. Once a friend of mine drove me from Santa Barbara, where we were both going to school, to my parents' house in San Diego and was wide-eyed and a little put-off when she saw where I lived. Had I been less guarded in previous conversations, my guess is that her reaction would have been different. In this case, she delivered just the kind of rejection I'd been trying to protect myself from. Sometime shortly after that trip she looked at me and said, *just because you have a Diego Rivera painting on the wall doesn't make you Mexican.*

It sounds harsh but looking back, I can see more clearly that her resentment wasn't just about me. She was in her own process of trying to understand her identity as a Chicana, grappling with being a college student and how that had started to change her relationships with family members and the people she grew up with. Still, the mistake was mine and I felt deeply ashamed for breaking her trust and for being seen in the reality of my class experience; for having been caught and called out. At the time, neither of us quite knew how to handle it.

By default, we agreed to handle it by not talking about it again. We stayed friends but I continued to be self-conscious and hide in ways that created distance. That same friend, years later, admitted to me that while she cared about me, she felt like she didn't really know me. She said she'd never seen me be vulnerable and she wondered why I never reached out for help when I needed it. I'd let my lack of skill in navigating class dynamics compromise my ability to build a truly reciprocal relationship, to let someone in enough so that she could have my back and trust me with hers, no matter how different our problems were. And isn't that what solidarity is all about?

The work of enacting a vision for justice and shifting the pillars that hold oppression in place is work that requires people to be in the long haul together, to build the kind of relationships that can withstand the pressures and despair involved in the day in, day out work. The mistake I made was to think that in order to have those relationships, I had to come from a certain kind of experience, or at least let others believe that I had.

My relationship to my own identity and my role as an activist changed when I realized that what others need most from me is not to hide or apologize for who I am, but to use whatever skills, qualities, and resources I have at my disposal. Much of what I bring to the table as an organizer – time management, planning, how to budget, the flexibility to volunteer my time or work for little pay – are partially a product of my middle class upbringing. Just as useful are the things I've learned from working with people of class backgrounds other than my own: the value of conflict and directness, an understanding of strong relationships as their own kind of currency, and the need for bold, uninhibited visioning.

But in order to make the most of what we each have to offer, we have to be self-aware and honest enough to let ourselves show. We've got to have some ways to talk about what's shaped who we are and where we are in relationship to one another.

From 2008-2015, I served as a Co-Director with Training for Change, an organization that helps grassroots communities build their capacity to stand up for social, economic, and environmental justice. Having worked with hundreds of activists, I've observed just how much class can impact organizational practices and culture. Yet, class dynamics are rarely discussed in a way that increases self-awareness or the fluency to be able to interact across class differences effectively. Even activists with a high level of sensitivity to race, gender, and sexuality are often still clueless when it comes to noticing how class influences their interpersonal relationships and organizational structures. I'm interested in how organizations can create cultures that support transparency about class, and active conversations about how to allocate resources in a way that makes participation of all their members accessible and sustainable.

Cost-Sharing: One Way to Get People Talking

At Training for Change, our roles as trainers often required us to start at home, to experiment with our own practices so that we could offer options rooted in our own learning, not just theory. We were lucky to have had working class founders and working class trainers who built class-consciousness into the work from the beginning. While I was there, I noticed that their influence helped keep the organization from becoming too entrenched in middle class ways of operating – which are often the norm in non-profit settings.

The work culture tended to value relationships over procedure, was highly adaptive instead of being procedural, and the collective of trainers made a deliberate practice of working through issues with each other, rather than avoiding them. This helped create one of the strongest organizational containers I've ever had working in a non-profit, and I credit these qualities to our strong working class roots. More organizations could look to the wisdom of their raised-poor and working class members when considering how to create an internal culture that is innovative, resilient, and understands how to balance tasks with time for personal connection, conflict resolution, and play.

Beyond the level of organizational culture, there were a number of other ways we thought about class and accessibility within our work. Some basics: we used a sliding scale for our workshops instead of a flat rate for our programs; we raised money to provide a large number of scholarships; and we invested a good deal of time into recruiting support from members of the community so that we had people who could offer things like free housing and airport pick-ups for participants. However, the most unique practice that we incorporated into our work was a cost-sharing process that we used during our annual trainer retreat.

Training for Change has historically run on a shoe-string budget and for a long time, we didn't have money to pay the travel expenses for our trainer collective to come together in person each year. Even so, the retreats always felt like a necessity. Without them, it would have been challenging to build community and nurture skill development and growth within the collective. Rather than sacrifice these retreats due to scarcity of funds, we elected to use cost-sharing as an option for paying the expenses ourselves.

Cost-sharing is a tool that was developed in Movement for a New Society (MNS), a lesser-known but very influential network of activists who, in the 1970s and 80s, worked to bring about fundamental social change through principles of nonviolence. Their work included experiments in collective living, training, and direct action campaigns.

In a newsletter from 1986, MNS member Joan Nikelsky described cost sharing as *a revolutionary and empowering process because everyone participates in thinking about their own and others' financial situations...we experiment with 'redistributing wealth' on a small scale*. MNS also acknowledged that money was a volatile discussion topic for any group but that the cost-sharing process was one way of creating safety and 'unfreezing secrecy' about money. MNS used cost-sharing methods to fund various activities within their work, sometimes on a very small scale, other times with as many as 75 people.

Here's how it was typically done with our group of six to eight trainers: we started by calculating the expenses associated with travel for the retreat for each person, which included things like flight or train tickets, as well as child care costs, etc. When we had the total, we wrote that up so everyone could see it. If the total cost of the retreat was something like \$4,000, then our job as a group was to come up with \$4,000 to cover everyone's expenses amongst ourselves.

Before asking anyone to make a pledge toward that amount, we partnered up to get support to think through our financial considerations. This was a critical part of the process. In these conversations we were asked to examine and be transparent about aspects of our class position and any other specifics related to our income and expenses at that moment. This could include things such as current debt, ways that we

were financially supporting our partners or other family members, medical expenses, inheritance or other sources of income, and the amount of non-paid work we were doing for the organization or other projects. The support given in pairs helped us move through any guilt, shame, or defensiveness about contributing or receiving money. We took it slowly and made room for any emotions that might surface.

Once there'd been ample time for these check-ins, we'd often make time for a go-around as a whole group, where each person was given space to share as much as they wanted about their class and monetary considerations at that moment. This supported transparency among the entire group, and it also increased the level of accountability to one another. Hearing each person in the go-around helped us make decisions about how much we could each contribute, with knowledge of what others might need from us.

I've often felt less attached to my own money when it's clear how the contribution I make supports someone else, and when I've had the opportunity to understand the context for their financial situation, as opposed to just seeing numbers. For instance, a few years ago one of our group members shared with everyone that she was in danger of losing her house because she'd been putting a good deal of her time and money toward helping a radical poster collective stay open. While she was of a similar class position and had the same earning capacity as I did, I found it much easier to be generous with supporting her participation by making a larger contribution, knowing that she had been risking her own stability to support another cause. The same has been true when I've had awareness of our group members going through major life transitions with work, parenting, and caring for elderly family members.

Once we were done sharing in the larger group, we usually went back into pairs to decide on an amount that each of us felt we could contribute toward the total. There was no pressure or expectation for anyone to contribute a particular amount. A person whose plane ticket cost \$400 could pledge nothing toward the total if it was beyond their means to give at that time, while a person who spent nothing to get to the retreat might contribute hundreds of dollars if they had the resources to do so. The pledges were made anonymously on pieces of paper while one person collected them to add up the total. If we fell short of the \$4,000 needed in the first round, we went a second or third round and used additional support in pairs as people discussed whether or not they could give more than their initial pledge.

I found that these extra rounds could be useful opportunities to reconsider the ways in which our class training or values might influence our sense of how much we could give. I was taught by my family to plan, save, and budget carefully. I've noticed in myself that when I've participated in these cost-sharing processes, my first instinct about how much I could or wanted to give was not always a true reflection of how much money I actually had available. I might consider some of the money I have in savings as money

that I “can’t spend” whereas many of the working class people I’ve been close to are more likely to share whatever money they have available in the moment.

For me, the exercise of participating in the cost-share multiple times and sometimes in multiple rounds during one retreat had the impact of loosening up how I think about giving in general and what I can or can’t spend. It’s been useful for me as a middle class person to identify when I actually can give more generously. Likewise, I saw members of our group push back when someone with limited financial means seemed to want to give beyond what was really practical for them. The challenges that got offered in both directions were helpful in curbing tendencies to hoard wealth or giving beyond one’s means.

Eventually, we arrived at a result that felt equitable to each person in the group and that covered the total. At the end, one person was put in charge of collecting checks from anyone who pledged and redistributing the funds to reimburse expenses.

We chose to keep the actual amount that each person gave anonymous, though another group using a cost-share process could choose to do that part with full transparency if the feeling was that it would support accountability. One reason we did it anonymously was that we wanted to acknowledge that participating in the cost-share and volunteering to talk about class and money with other colleagues is a risk for everyone. Offering privacy about the amount each person chose affirmed a sense of trust and ensured that our participation wouldn’t ultimately be judged by how much we ended up giving.

Certainly, one goal of the cost-share exercise was to raise the money needed to cover the expenses of the retreat and to experiment with distributing our personal resources equitably. However, another important goal of the activity was to create space for conversation about class and money within the collective. The challenge of having to make real choices related to money raised the stakes of the conversation and didn’t allow people to hide out in abstractions; we had to face real questions about what it meant to interact responsibly from our class positions. To that end, the cost-share was as much about the process as it was the outcome. We don’t assume that everyone will have the same level of self-awareness but, even so, we think there was value in giving each person an opportunity to be in that learning process and gain new insights about their relationship to sharing the resources they have.

Limitations and Encouragements

The process for cost-sharing, as I’ve described it here, is just one possible template for initiating more conversation about class, unlearning some of our beliefs about money and scarcity, and raising needed funds. However, like any other template for a group process, it can and should be adapted and applied in a way that makes sense for the

group using it. In the spirit of encouraging others to try it, I'll offer a few reflections to qualify my own enthusiasm for the cost-share process and suggest some considerations for others who may want to use it.

First, it's important to say that the trainers who used this cost-share process together in Training for Change were people who had the opportunity to establish trust and relationship with each other over a number of years. Each trainer must have already demonstrated a political awareness of self, group identity, and systems of oppression in order to be part of the collective. Therefore, engaging in the cost-share process together required less groundwork to create safety and shared analysis than another group might need in order to have success with the process.

However, this doesn't mean that a group that is less experienced with each other or with less political alignment couldn't use the cost-share process successfully. It just means that a group may want to use trust-building exercises in advance and/or do some other studies on class before delving into something as vulnerable as the cost-share. Facilitators of the process should also take their time with setting guidelines, contracting for the group's permission, and allowing space for individuals to voice resistance and negotiate what they may need in order to participate.

The second thing I'll point out is that the total amount a group is trying to raise through the cost-share process must be scaled with some accuracy to the amount of money that is within the means of the people involved in the process. Our small group of trainers was usually safe in assuming that we could come up with \$2,000-\$4,000 between us, but if we predicted that our shared expenses were going to be higher than that, we might need to supplement the pool of money another way. In a case like that, I'd suggest setting a realistic goal for the cost-share and having a fundraising activity that the group could do together in order to raise the difference.

Finally, everyone involved in the process should feel as though they can participate without the repercussion of being shamed by others in the group. Cost-sharing should happen in an environment where most people can achieve a balance between holding each other accountable and showing patience toward one another. It is not the best tool for helping a group gain new insight on an existing conflict, and if race and class dynamics are already contentious in the group, cost-sharing may not be the right activity to introduce.

That said, in a group culture that is healthy, curious, and willing to explore their relationship to class, cost-sharing can help cultivate a setting in which people are more likely to talk openly about their class backgrounds and financial positions in conversations outside of the process itself.

At Training for Change we noticed that the cost-share process supported us to name class more often than we might otherwise, even when we weren't talking about money directly. It's wasn't uncommon in our conversations with each other that I heard people preface their statements with things like, "This might be my middle class need for control showing up here but..." or "That moment brought up some intimidation I feel about not having had a college education..." or "I'm proud that the story I told in that group helped make space for working class people to feel acknowledged..." We all became more skillful in noticing how class might be impacting our interactions, and learning how to name dynamics more openly.

In a dominant culture that loves money but hates to talk about it, a commitment to being transparent about our own financial positions within our organizations, collectives, and communities is a transformative act. Trying it out may be as simple as initiating conversations about your own class experience or as complex as getting the groups you work with to adopt new practices for sharing resources. The important thing is honesty and a willingness to use what you know and what you have to create real partnerships for change.

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USING FAMILY MONEY TO BUY COMMUNITY SPACE: THE SLEEPTIGHT HOUSE - Mac Liman



Sleeptight Bug drawings by @aayjah.art

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Living with others always seemed like a good idea to me. It makes sense to share resources. It may be extravagant for me to have my very own juicer and dehydrator, but if I live in a house full of friends, what better way is there to process an entire crate of dumpstered apples than to juice and dehydrate them? An art project or puzzle will monopolize most of a small apartment, but in a giant shared house I can afford to have a table or even an entire room dedicated to crafts. It's cheaper and less wasteful to buy in bulk. It's fun and practical to drop an invite at one house to invite ten friends to dinner. Watering the garden is easier if the task is split seven ways. And most importantly, if I live with others I am less likely to feel alone. I grew up white and wealthy in houses that were so large that my family members couldn't hear each other even when we were all at home. But living communally, even if I am sick in bed for several days or stuck in a set schedule, I get to interact with others, hear their stories from the big world, and always have someone to ask for help – even if I am terrified to actually ask for it. I can have a fuller life with more options if I share space with others. And so I have never lived alone.

Today I live in an eleven bedroom duplex in downtown Denver that I purchased with my dad's money. My nine beloved housemates and I share two kitchens, four bathrooms,



food, a large yard, garden and chicken coop, the expense of utilities, taxes, insurance and construction projects, and the mortgage payments that we send to my dad each month. This is the Sleight house.

Our idea to buy community space surfaced in 2005, three years before any property was purchased. I had been living in a community punk house with 6-9 housemates, miscellaneous animals and traveling kids, a Food Not Bombs chapter and our local bicycle co-op. The house faced implosion on a fairly regular basis as our flaky landlord cooked up new get-rich-quick schemes, the City cracked down on zoning violations, the FBI raided the house as part of an activist suppression

campaign (that really happened), and the daily stress of keeping the space safe and clean pushed inhabitants to our physical and emotional limits. It was magical in many ways and I needed something more stable. The core group with the greatest interest in making changes in this particular house were white, class-privileged women who had grown up together in Denver. While my dad with his two houses, four cars and an airplane represented the largest concentration of wealth privilege, all of us had grown up in houses that our families owned. And although there was a fair amount of class privilege denial and hiding in our activist community, there had also been inspiring examples of people honestly sharing their access. Housemates used holiday gift money to purchase tools for the bike shop, talked openly about investing college fund money in microloans in Nicaragua, borrowed family vehicles to share rides, and made sure that everyone in the community knew that a personal inheritance could be used by anyone for an abortion or bond money. These practices laid the groundwork for us to start thinking about and researching how to buy a house. A couple years and community-house-incarnations later, our landlord told us that he would not renew our lease in spite of the work we had put into building a garden and repairing the space and it seemed possible – or at least worth an attempt – to formally try to buy something.

Our original plan – inspired by dozens of existing co-ops and land projects, collective living elders, social justice activists, lawyers, and realtors – was for my dad to front the money to buy a house. We would fix it up and then he would quitclaim the house to a Limited Liability Company (LLC) where housemates are the member/owners. Then the LLC would get a bank loan to pay off my dad (using the house as collateral) and continue paying the bank mortgage. Member/owners would have the option to buy in and out of the LLC over time so that some of the money they put in could leave with



them, and we would potentially be able to refinance periodically (every five years or so) to take out money to share with each other, create an emergency fund to help neighbors fend off foreclosure, invest in other community ownership projects, and/or give away. The founders would make a “manageable” three-year commitment and there would always be clear ways for people to enter and exit the arrangement. Also, there would be options for people to merely rent if they were not interested in owning or sublet if they wanted to own but still travel. Simple, right

Four years later in 2012, very little of this plan was actualized. None of the original people ended up owning the house. And of the group of seven who were involved when it was purchased, only three of us fulfilled our three-year commitment. (Two of us are still here.) The house

is not owned by the community or an LLC. I am the sole person on the title—which also was something we never hoped would happen—and my dad is still the lender.

Don’t get me wrong; there have also been tremendous accomplishments, both personal and logistical. In 2007, my dad offered to use some of his money to help me buy a house but he was explicitly against buying property that I would share with others in any way. In 2008, he bought this house knowing that I would be splitting responsibility, liability and all benefits with my friends. This change of heart was the result of months of debates, tearful fights and inviting him into my life in ways that neither of us had ever wanted or expected. My communitarian, activist lifestyle and values are often at odds with my dad’s choices and beliefs. I spent a lot of years projecting my fight against “the man” directly onto my rich, straight, white, Jewish, baby boomer, conservative, rah rah free market capitalism dad. Becoming open enough to understand where our interests meet (he wants to use his resources to help me be stable and happy; sharing my access with others brings me stability and happiness) and to work together has been a challenging and incredibly rewarding process.

From 2008 to 2012, nineteen different people lived at Sleptight, most of them very happily with partners, children, pregnancy, illness, beauty, and adventure. The group includes new Denverites, travelers, old friends, community house novices, and collective living experts. We *mostly* finished three massive construction projects where housemates completed hundreds of hours of work and also paid contractors over \$70,000. We planned for, budgeted and then borrowed that money from my dad



and also from a City loan program for first-time and/or low-income homeowners. The house was transformed from having no functional plumbing or electricity to being livable – comfortable even – and compliant with building code. The 1500 sq feet back yard was paved with asphalt when we moved in, but now is full of chickens, garden beds and healthy, remediated soil. Most of us lived in this neighborhood for many years before we purchased the house and we have been able to honor our promise to be here for the long-term.

We moved onto our block with the commitment to listen to the families, businesses and institutions that were here before us, to maintain relationships, to be visible and accessible, and to follow our working class Chicano neighbors especially in their fights against police brutality and for a fair share of public investment. The house allows us to live inexpensively in growing downtown Denver, enabling all of us to do many things with our time and money that would not have otherwise been possible. With low monthly expenses, housemates have paid off debt, sent money home to family, left abusive jobs, chosen lower-paying but higher-satisfaction work, pursued education, traveled, made art, rested, and healed – options usually only available to the wealthy in our culture. The house has earned a reputation of being stable – both in day-to-day lifestyle and also as a landmark and resource that can be depended on to last. While we have not yet been able to share home equity, the larger community has been able to use the house to receive mail at an established address, borrow tools, stock emergency preparedness gear, register for parole or use as proof of residency, store belongings, park vehicles, hold meetings and events, use as a rental reference, provide childcare, and share food. And Sleptight is still a place I am excited to invite people into, and where I want to live.

The failure (so far) to realize collective ownership however, is a source of fear and disappointment for me. I worry that a tense landlord power dynamic will hang over me forever, that the failure to transfer ownership will be interpreted as selfish or controlling, that I will die and my housemates will have no legal rights to the house, or that our goals were too lofty for people raised in this culture dominated by capitalism, hoarding and distrust. But my housemates tell me that they do not carry these fears or disappointment as much as I do. Some of them still want to patiently work towards collective ownership with me even (with varying degrees of hopefulness). Some are not interested. And most housemates who recently joined the project are either unattached to Denver or aren't yet close enough to this group to make a commitment

to own property together. I must admit these are good reasons to opt out of collective homeownership. And ultimately, it's probably appropriate that I – the rich kid – put more energy than others into keeping an eye on and addressing my own class privilege.

There have been plenty of uncomfortable or angry feelings about me owning the house, though – and about decisions made by me, my dad, and previous housemates. But most of the big fights and difficult struggles we have been through at Sleptight had less to do with our steps toward and away from collective homeownership, and more to do with the general trials and tribulations of collective living and I believe our openness about class and classism made many of those common trials easier to surmount.

Sleptight housemates have a wide range of class backgrounds. Among the majority white residents, we represent a wide range of ages, genders, sexualities and abilities, but our class experiences have been the most diverse and dynamic. I think this is possible because the introduction to the house calls out class immediately. We ask that housemates be “more than just roommates” and, vague as it is, be “in it for more than just the cheap rent.” As part of that, the first thing a new housemate learns about Sleptight is that it is connected to my class privilege and is part of a process of figuring out ways to share and redistribute resources. Discussions of class dynamics in the house, how to use common funds and shared income, the contributions that are required and requested of housemates, and where we sit in the context of a gentrifying neighborhood are all topics continually on the table. I have never lived in a place where class is so central to our daily discussions (and I LOVE it).

At previous community houses, attempts to figure out why a housemate is late to or absent from house work days may have degenerated into shaming or only look deep enough to analyze gender dynamics. At Sleptight, a repeated absence initiates a conversation about how we each developed a “work ethic” in our lives and how we want our contributions to be valued and appreciated specifically because of our class. In my case, being raised rich has meant artificially creating non-monetary value and worth for my work because there was not an urgent need for money in my family. As a result, I find that a verbal “thank you” sometimes feels more important to me than a wage.

Chad, raised middle-class, says he feels highly motivated by having a schedule, deadlines and even evaluation of some kind. Chris, raised working class, wants to put his own personal money into a project in order to feel ownership over it. And for Dave, a housemate who was raised poor, anything that too-closely resembles working for others can feel depressing or oppressive. His dad is a plumber whose endless work hours, diminishing benefits and perpetual lay-offs damaged his hands, back, and relationships. To keep rent low for his family, Dave's dad often traded home repairs to their landlord. In my family's custom-built home, my parents hired out all the housework quickly and quietly; repairs to men and the cleaning to women. When the sink becomes

clogged at Sleightight, I am often excited and empowered by the experience of using tools and fixing the problem on my own – especially with salvaged parts and a DIY manual. For Dave, climbing under the kitchen sink understandably feels very different. Sad, even. If we didn't know this about each other, Dave's hesitation to unclog the drain could be perceived as non-contributing where my enthusiasm would be unfairly rewarded. Because we talk, we can find positive ways to combine his skills and my eagerness.

I would like to think that the diversity of class experience in the house helps us to make clearer decisions about money. In addition to splitting the mortgage we pay to my dad, property taxes and insurance that is paid annually, and our monthly utilities, we all also pay into three savings funds each month: Construction Fund, Emergency Fund and Food Fund. Individual contributions are small enough that no one has needed to modify their contribution in an ongoing way due to loss of income or higher personal expenses because of classism or racism, but we practice talking about money and class often enough that we feel (humbly) confident we can come up with a flexible solution when the time comes.

Construction Fund money is collected to finance actual construction (drywall, joint compound, tools, hiring experts, etc.) and the cost of ongoing projects around the house such as seeds for the garden, furnace filters, shelves for the basement, batteries for smoke alarms, bike grease, etc.

Emergency Fund money acts as a safety net for the house. It is used as a grant for situations where we all are in need of the cash (to replace the hot water heater that sprung a leak, subsidize a huge heating bill in months when there are fewer housemates, pay fines from the City if we get caught with unpermitted chickens), or as a loan for individual housemates in an emergency. Emergency is defined as “something that will prevent a housemate from participating in the house if they don't get the money.” It has been loaned to housemates to pay rent in times of unexpected unemployment, finance a car repair, and help with medical or family emergencies. No one pays a security deposit when moving in, so the Emergency Fund ensures that we can weather the unexpected as a group and prevents anyone from being isolated by a financial emergency. And because we have a range of excitement and fear about saving, spending, losing, and hoarding, together we have been able to create healthier boundaries with Fund money that serve the group now and the project into the future. Three housemates hold keys to the lockbox where the Emergency Fund is kept. As the official homeowner, I am intentionally not one of the key holders so money power is somewhat more decentralized.



Food Fund – our smallest fund – is used throughout the month to keep us stocked up on staples (oil, grains, beans, peanut butter, etc.), buy in bulk, and make sure we have enough money on-hand for an impromptu dinner party. This money is easily accessible to all housemates and is loosely tracked on a clipboard. This system has worked much better than previous reimbursement arrangements and more fairly distributes the task of shopping. It lacks accountability though, and housemates often express confusion about how to use it, especially when it is their first time sharing a pool of money. Money has gone missing in the past (we don't know how), but since the total amount of money in the fund is not enough to destabilize the house financially, it's felt worth it to continue with this structureless experiment. Until we have an easier system for tracking [apps like Venmo and Splitwise didn't exist in 2012 y'all] it can be an opportunity to lean into abundance and trust that the group will make sure we are all healthy and fed, even when we inevitably experience distrust or scarcity in our home. I encourage others to use the Food Fund for items they know not everyone will eat (gluten-free flour or their favorite flavor of ice cream) because I want our shared money to honor and support that we have different needs and desires. But I still can't bring myself to use the Food Fund to buy the cans of juice I use to treat my low blood sugars. Someday, maybe.

In two weeks, three new housemates move in. We all went bowling together last weekend; a wholesome Sleptight get-to-know-you field trip. It was great. I don't know if the new folks will want to "buy in" to the house. Their commitments are "through the growing season" or "until school is out." Transition continues. But we also persist in dreaming big about future possibilities. This project encourages experimentation and dreaming. It is good for reining one another in, too; remembering the real limitations of capacity and time while pushing through the internalized ones that come from classism and oppression. And because every step we have taken is something that could not be accomplished alone (no matter how much money one has access to), every day I am reaffirmed in my need for other people.

AFTERWORD

It's 2023. 15 years since buying Sleptight! 11 years since writing this piece. I still live at Sleptight. I am still the sole owner. I am the only remaining founding member. 31 people have moved in and out since 2012. Three people moved back in after extended stays away. Four people (including me) took a "Sleptight Sabbatical" when their monthly contributions were subsidized for three months so they could take a break. Two babies were born in the house (one at a birthing center; one in a second floor bedroom). One was given the middle name "Mac." 17 current and former housemates are friends.

We collectively paid off the original loan from my dad (principle only) in 2017. We never missed a payment. The current cost includes taxes + insurance + utilities + maintenance/repair. It is one of the most affordable places to live in Denver by far.

(Sleeptight housemates pay ~\$500/month while the average 1-bedroom rental nearby is \$1,900.)



My dad was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's. We still argue about the causes and solutions to inequality, and we still persist in attempting to make decisions about money together. I occasionally use the history of the Sleeptight House as a righteous example of why relying on community is a sound and worthy

investment. His net wealth has continued to grow in my lifetime and I still stand to inherit from him someday.

Various combos of housemates have written three drafts of collective ownership agreements and bylaws and we still haven't completed the process. [Descriptions of some of the hurdles detailed below.] I haven't given up, though. In the most recent draft, my partner and housemate Caroline (resident since 2020), my friend and housemate Sovereign (resident since 2017), and I (resident since 2008) will be the first round of co-owners. Baby steps.

My biggest advice to anyone participating in a project that involves buying community space with family money is 1) do not underestimate how long this will take. Those of us with class privilege are uniquely positioned to take on the burden, risk and expense of experimenting, pushing for new/different ownership structures and building the infrastructure for others to improve upon. Class privilege and access to wealth will make many parts of this move more quickly and nimbly than it would otherwise, but it will still likely take longer than you hope.

2) Focus on long-term, large scale social change. The just economy and collective ownership that our society and planet urgently need will not come about from transferring one individual property at a time. For every **1** hour I spend writing bylaws for cooperative corporate homeownership or worrying and scheming about my own inheritance, I try to spend **2** hours campaigning with thousands of comrades to de-

commodify all corporate housing nationwide, to raise taxes on the rich, and to replace racial capitalism with a solidarity economy. And if you have class privilege, stay connected to a community that organizes people with class privilege towards justice, with love and for life; I couldn't and wouldn't have done any of this without them.

Below is a description of some hurdles that have gotten in the way of our collective ownership dreams and some of how we responded. I hope that these insights into our experience speed and aid your process.

- Our desire was to have legal protection and voting rights for resident owners as well as community stakeholders, but Cooperative Corporations in Colorado will not allow multiple “classes” of owners. We unfortunately didn't learn this until a year after drafting bylaws. There still are not many attorneys or accountants who understand cooperatives or collective ownership! Some of the ones who have the necessary expertise talk over women and people of color, and the antiracist feminist ones who are willing to advocate for collective ownership and affordable housing tend to be newer to the field. For our situation, we decided it was better to spend time and money supporting slightly less-experienced but more-values-aligned BIPOC and femme attorneys and feel good about that choice. At one point in the dark of 2020, we decided to hire a friend and former housemate (@aayjah.art) to create illustrations for our legal documents as a way to counterbalance the time and money spent in tough meetings with insulting professionals.
- After paying off the original loan to my dad, we decided that the biggest income potential we have as a collective is ourselves. Rather than relying on external lenders or the speculative market to access cash, we decided to pool money each month that goes into a fund to “pay out” housemates every few years. With seven regular contributors, we can afford to refund each of us \$15,000 every 5 years on a rotating basis. This is less than the amount of money that we could cash out if we sold the house on the market, but \$15,000 would be plenty to allow someone to leave (or stay) well, and is more aligned with our value of sustainable growth and affordable housing.
- The assessed value of the house has nearly tripled since 2008. We do not intend to sell it for profit, but transferring ownership is considered income to the individuals or entity that receives the house – and it's a taxable event. Since the capital gain is over \$600,000, that could mean a \$120,000 tax bill. We are not opposed to paying taxes, but this is an amount of money that has taken pro bono tax attorneys, three CPAs, and two years to figure out. Our current workaround includes the co-op filing taxes as a housing cooperative association and the legal marriage of two housemates that enables greater capital gains tax deductions.
- When families related by blood or marriage share their collective income, no tax is owed. When housemates share their savings, tax is owed. Coming up with a

budget that will cover possible taxes while also not impacting individuals' eligibility for public benefits has taken many spreadsheets and much math. We decided it may make sense to save or fundraise for potential future legal costs in the event that we go to court with the IRS or another agency as a way to expand case law that supports future non-traditional, collective ownership models.

- We decided that housemates should live together for at least 2 years before being eligible to co-own. From 2008-2016 the average housemate stayed 5 years. From 2017-2023 the average has been 2 years. The reasons are worthy of another essay, but we are trying to honor that there will necessarily be fertile and fallow years if this project is to last as long as we hope it will.
- The house was majority white and straight 2008-2016; since then it has been at least 50% BIPOC and majority queer. The class diversity remains. We made the choice to prioritize BIPOC and queer incoming housemates and – along with that – to practice addressing race dynamics as directly and often as class. (This is also worthy of another essay and I'm happy to tell you about it, though many groups ahead of us have shared their wisdom about shifting institutional culture along with demographics.) This choice has meant a smaller pool of candidates entering. It also means that newer housemates often have disproportionate experiences of destabilization before and outside Sleptight due to racism and homophobia/transphobia, and lower expectations of home ownership due to historic disenfranchisement. This doesn't change the goal or possibility of collective ownership; just shifts and deepens the conversations we have along the way. For example, we decided against a Land Trust or perpetually-restricted legal entity for ownership partly because we don't know what we don't know about the future needs of housemates nor of the ecosystem and context around us. If housemates are forever prevented from accessing equity in the house and – for example – the neighborhood changes around us to become significantly less safe for Black and trans housemates, we want those owners to be able to sell the house and leave with enough capital to find a new home.

Mac Liman (she/her) was born and raised in Colorado. She is passionate about organizing people around privileged identities – especially people who, like her, have race and class privilege. She has been able to do this work in various roles with beautiful, cross-class, multiracial community at Resource Generation since 2005 and the Chinook Fund since 2007. In addition to training, facilitating, and moving her people towards collective action, Mac accidentally became a master bicycle mechanic who taught thousands of people to fix thousands of bikes, and intentionally became a person who lives with many of her favorite people in a shared community home called Sleptight. She likes building infrastructure for a regenerative economy, being a good neighbor, asking questions, and making people laugh.

TEN OF CUPS FARM CONVERSATION ON FINANCES AND LIFE - Ten of Cups, 2024

Ten of Cups Farm is a Queer Family who seeks to be in emergent response to the Great Collapse. We have been in Love and practicing divinely inspired anti-capitalist choreography for over a decade. The steps are challenging. We are remembering how to be in bodies that belong to the Earth, and to Eachother, and to ourSelves. Always in tandem with unlearning of the individual-machine-body enforced by the inheritance of Colonial Capitalism. Each of us were drawn to the core beacon light of this shared dream from disparate paths. There is class disparity here, and a multiverse of gendered socializations, as well as upbringings in Catholicism, Atheism, Jewishness, Paganism and the religious myth of the amerikkkan dream. Among us are folks with careers, folks who don't earn money, mystics, builders, artists, childbearers, non-childbearers, dragons, folks with depression, folks with anxiety, folks who hear voices, folks with neurodivergence, A+ students, rejects, golden children, black sheep, middle children, oldest children and the babies of the family.

We've had a lot of fights. We FIGHT together. Conflict is at the center of any dynamic creation. We all believe this and allow it to change us, over and over. We run many of our decisions through the values we chose to entrust. *Generosity, Beauty, Love, Movement, Process, Stewardship, Togetherness, Candor, Transformation, and Complexity.* *Generosity* as in, include yourself in the struggle for liberation, abandon what you learned about charity, and cultivate your gifts so that you can give them and remain energized. *Beauty* as in, radical beauty-making is a good response to the ugliness of oppression, queer adornment is an act of rebellion against our oppressors, and creativity is the antithesis of genocide. *Love* as in, gentleness sometimes and ferocity at others, as in, *listening with the ears of your heart* and being changed by your comrades. *Movement* as in not getting stuck, if something isn't having the outcome that we are collectively striving for, try something new, and cultivate balance between rootedness and surrender. *Process* as in, speaking of surrender, there are only rare and brief moments of completion and buckle up because it IS the same dozen or so conversations for the rest of our lives. Observe what shifts and learn to love the cycles of return. *Stewardship* as in, we are collaborating with the more than human world, learn what makes each other feel safe and happy, and get good at it! *Togetherness* as in, we're all in this together and it's worth the time it takes to go at the pace where we *feel* our connectedness. *Candor* as in, say the unpopular thing, listen to the unpopular thing, praise the prophetic voice who challenges the status quo and cultivate an environment that cherishes the possibility of a liberatory Truth. *Transformation* as in experience time moving in all directions, practice dancing in polarities, reflect, be present, and vision toward the liberated future. *Complexity* as in cultivating a sense of wonder, re-learning the absolute necessity and grace of a thriving diverse ecosystem,

and sinking into the life-long work of unraveling the sick and twisted knot of the white-supremacist-cis-hetero-colonial- capitalist- patriarchy. Woosh.

The six of us adults and our two kids are so grateful to the Táytnapam peoples who always have and still do steward the Lands we've called home for the past five years. Here, we are practicing ancestral skills, growing more and more of our own food, creating life and giving good deaths. We provide space for artists, madfolx, healers and organizers to create, go nuts, relax, regroup and whatever else they wish. In our newly painted pinky-purple living room (the paint color was actually called "best friends") we gathered around the fire, as we have so many times before to have this conversation. We passed around the recording device, took turns anchoring our 2 year old, let the dog in and out a million times and sunk into a few hours of reflection which we offer to you from our broken open hearts in hopes that our words and experiences will find anyone who needs them. Thank you for the generosity of your attention.

Question 1: What principles or ideas motivated you all to come together to create your family and land project? Were there any other projects or groups you modeled parts of your ideas off or got inspiration from?

Silas: The first thing that's coming to mind for me is the way that necessity was a huge inspiration and motivation for me to dream of and turn toward some kind of queer communal living because I grew up poor and in all of my young adult life was working a lot of jobs that weren't securing a future of security for me.

I personally really struggled to find groups that were modeling anything that felt livable and inviting and accessible to me.

Cait: As I approached having a child but even before that [I had a] feeling of not understanding how one was supposed to survive and be happy and fulfilled in the nuclear family model. My parents and other family members [were part] of hippie communes and having been exposed to that way of living, as well as village life, as a kid growing up. Before we created Ten of Cups, I had been trying to form something similar with a different group of people. I saw firsthand how easily class divisions would lead to the poorer people being left out of the project and the richer people buying houses that they would then rent to the poorer folks. Watching those "radical" ideals get so easily swept aside in favor of what was easier for those with class privilege was part of what led me to the actual radical politicization of that vision and dream. I realized, oh no, this needs to be really, really queered and intentionally anticapitalist in order to actually include the people that I want to build my life with.

Bird: Some of the avenues that helped inspire me were Seattle-based organizations like Passages Northwest and Camp Ten Trees, which as a teenager became the first places I saw that queers could be in community with each other and consider it to be something like family. And then I sought out more actual land projects like Short Mountain Radical Fairy Sanctuary and IDA in the southern United States and saw some examples of that possibility happening, but didn't gain a huge understanding of what their deeper structures were, or necessarily see them as exactly what I wanted. And I also explored people's less queer, more land-based farming communities in Central America and saw and was inspired by indigenous practices there and people living in relationship with the land out of necessity. So many of the resources out there about "communal living" or "intentional communities" focused so much on the potential for failure, which always pissed me off. I knew we could create something beautiful and long lasting, especially if we approached it from a queer anti-capitalist decolonialist framework— aspects none of those resources ever talked about.

Silas: Most of us came with the idea that the earth is healing, and we wanted to live in a rural place closer to mountains, forests and rivers and be able to grow a lot of our food. But also to share that home and that space with people who need time and a place to step aside from their own chosen paths— whether that's city life, institutions, academia, or if their lives are such that they've had to work in a corporate way or in food service or whatever type of thing that one might need to step aside from for a minute.

Bird: Some other principles that we chose to enact were trying to decolonize our ideals around what kinds of labor mattered or were valued, not forcing everyone to be in the workforce and allowing people to have really differing relationships to doing paid work based on our different class backgrounds, access to jobs or education levels.

We also have a commitment to unpacking every single thing, always choosing to go towards the difficult conversations even when we're exhausted or tired or mad or sick of each other.

Silas: In order to do communal living we knew we must have a practice of doing shadow work, which I will briefly define here as the inner work of identifying our own unconscious material through recognizing what in the outer world is aggravating us, giving us a feeling of charge and learning more about the part of those external aggravators that are our own unmet needs or elements of ourselves that are being repressed and wanting expression. And in my opinion, the baseline reason we've ever lost a member or had a rupture, or people come close and then they're like, nah that's not for me, the baseline reason is being turned off by the amount of dedication we have to that conflict work.

Early on we had the idea: *Okay, you guys, this is crazy, but what if we just did share all the money and all the debts?* It took so much courage from each of us individually and

as a collective to just experiment. Snake aka Mark Fleming, a mentor of ours, taught us: “everything is an experiment.”

Bird: Inheritance is evil. Debt is evil. Inheritance is a form of colonization that keeps the rich, rich and the poor, poor. Passing large amounts of money from parent to child and on is a way of hoarding money and is mostly done by white people, who got that money in the first place by violent practices. We know debt often comes from evil corporations that are benefiting from people’s poorness and is not a personal flaw or an individual’s responsibility. We knew we must talk about money constantly to have a liberated group of people who are sharing money.

Silas: All of us individually had personal practices of making reparations, so it was an immediate agreement of our early financial principles that because of all the reasons why we as white folks, even in our mixed class background-edness have access to more money, a lifelong goal and commitment of ours will be to give huge amounts of it to people who it has been stolen from, their ancestors, etc. Most especially Black American descendants of slaves and indigenous peoples of this continent.

Cait: We have a shared value around ways of knowing and magic and spirituality. That different ways of knowing are valued, centered and prioritized and not focusing too much on “intellectual book learning smart sounding” types of knowledge, but felt, intuitive, ancestral, other ways of knowing.

Mark: We all share a belief that we are witnessing some form of collapse, whether it’s the collapse of Global Capitalism or the environmental collapse. And yeah we’re afraid but also in love with the world and want to be even more in love with the world we know we could be in.

Question 2: What kinds of conversations about money did you have in the years you were initially planning?

Maggie: I came in with a lot of really fucked up notions, that will take the rest of my life to unpack and that’s why I was driven to come here as I had a feeling that this is wrong. And that didn’t mean that I came in prepared for all of the incredibly hard conversations that I was going to have. A lot of unpacking of ownership and attachment and bullshit concepts like charitable actions. There’s a lot of lip service paid to the idea of “What’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine” and digging deeply into that and being like what does mine even mean and what does yours even mean and what the fuck and ownership is really messed up and it’s so deeply ingrained.

Sayer: Any time we wanted to take another logistical step towards finance sharing, like making a budget sheet for example, so many new conversations were sparked. I never

would have had all the conversations. If it wasn't for trying to do these things and having to ask, "Okay, how do we do this?"

The first iteration of money sharing that we did, wasn't sharing money except that we opened a bank account together and started depositing money into it monthly. We each chose an amount that we were able to deposit based on our income and financial situations at the time, and we drew up a one page contract where we said "the thing about this account is that ownership over the money in it is not based on the amount of money that each individual person put into it, we all are equally owning this and it is for this project. And if people leave, they're still putting this money towards this project right now." And that was the level we were at and the agreement that we made at that time. I was in law school and unemployed, and I was putting \$20 a month and it was from the student loans that I was getting.

Cait: Early on there were a lot of conversations based on people's different class backgrounds, about how much different people had had to be frugal. That was one of the frequent, uncomfortable conversations: "oh, I don't know how to spend less money. I don't know how to indulge this particular thing." Certainly shame came into play.

Maggie: At first, Bird, Silas, and I started sharing finances. At the time, I was working a part time remote job, Silas and Bird had a small amount of savings to live off and we realized it was the perfect time to start sharing our income and spending. there was a lot of grappling with the idea of what is a need and what is a want. We've traversed so much space and time and thought over that, now we believe needs *are* wants, wants *are* needs. But at that time I was coming together with people who had very different experiences of how to spend money, how to save or what we save for, what is necessary, what's "unnecessary." There was a lot of unpacking for me. Like I was saying before about the lip service and the bullshit mindset of charity that as the person whose name was on the paycheck that we were all receiving and we were agreeing we're collectively receiving this money and we're sharing it, there was a lot for me to confront, like my notions of entitlement or just being able to sink into the humility that comes with the truth that I don't actually know what we should do with our money and I don't know better than anyone else. There was a lot for me in there about pleasure, and realizing that I had a totally fractured relationship with pleasure, and had a lot of internalized shame and stigma that informed my beliefs about necessity. Also, just figuring out how to track our finances was a big thing and figuring out how to understand where the money was going and where it existed. Banks and software sure don't make it easy for groups of adults to share money.

Silas: On the one hand, money and other resources that exist within the group need to be allotted where there is need and also with a whole group watching, it becomes more relevant for people to weigh in on what an individual might be needing. And I think there's been a lot of taboo conversations and breaking down of cultural norms around

privacy or individualist self care, that are totally related and have been really catalyzed by the fact that we're sharing finances. Since it's true that money is a tangible thing that we use for exchange inside of capitalism, but it is also such a big symbol for our resource, for our energy, and so witnessing and observing where it feels natural or inherent or easy to put money and then being like wait, why? Like why does it feel natural and easy and inherent to put money toward the mandatory health insurance of the people with paychecks, versus for example, the chiropractic or acupuncture care that somebody needs but we say we can't afford it. And not that we've figured that out or cracked that code, but I think that it's been a very formative and ongoing conversation to address the needs for wellbeing individually and collectively and how we meet those needs, with the multitudes of resources that we have, through the work of observing and challenging our preconceived notions about what is good or right to allot resource toward.

I'm just remembering an early conflict around Christmas presents and being in a community where there were some people who have experienced violence around Christmas time and experienced Christmas itself as a violent structure and idea. And then folks who were raised celebrating Christmas and who in their families of origin there were very practiced traditions of gift giving.

Bird: Yeah, we've had a lot of conversations about the ways that each of our classes were changing as we became one conglomerate financial entity. How some of us had a lot of loss of privilege and some of us gained privilege.

Cait: We also talked a lot about how we wanted to structure our reparations, what percentage we wanted to commit to giving and under what circumstances and to who, and that's evolved over the years from, we're going to do this percentage of giving to this kind of organization to being like fuck organizations actually, and shifting more mutual aid to individuals who we had or built relationships with. Anyway, we've [also] talked a lot about savings and retirement.

Silas: Sayer was the first person that I ever heard say: savings are unethical. We teased out the difference between unethical money hoarding and knowing how to meet our own needs, that includes putting money aside and not spending it?

Sayer: In our current system, we have different accounts for each of the things we're saving for, so we're not just hoarding money to have it. We have specific goals for each account. And we also move money to our community. We talked a lot in the early days about the energetic flow of money and not letting it be stagnant.

Maggie: When Silas mentioned the Christmas present conflict, I wanted to say that that was the beginning for me of a lot of process around differentiating from my family of origin that I know others of us share. Facing up to the expectations and the burdens

that are put on us by people outside of this family and beginning to really identify with this family as our family, where our values are being generated and acted out; versus trying to uphold and fit into and still receive the privileges of fitting into the expectations outside of this group. And, that was the beginning of noticing, Wow, there's so much differentiation that is going to be required to truly transform myself and transform my relationship to money and my relationship to family and people.

Bird: A lot of our financial conversations intertwined with our conversations about what it means to be a family. While we reject and generally disagree with heteronormative nuclear families, there is some way in which claiming that term has been a sort of reclaiming of the ways that we are often seen as less than and not validated as a true and actual family. Not a chosen family, just a family.

Silas: Not a “non-traditional family.” I've been really hating that one like yeah, what could be more traditional?

Sayer: When I was still living in Seattle, and I was a full time lawyer, and everyone else had moved out here and we were sharing money. I had a lot of strife and difficulty figuring out how to live my life in a way that made sense with all my friends from my job, who had their lawyer income, wanting to go out and eat food and go to bars and spend a lot of money and my hesitance and my fear to really presence my reality with them, which was that I had way less money than you. Even though we have the same job. Because I share my money with my family that doesn't live here—six other people and two children, and I am going to move there when this job is done. At that time we talked about all the work that we do for each other that does not involve money that just makes our lives so much better. Like making dinner every night, it's hard to exist out there by yourself and to have to fucking make dinner for yourself every night. And my life here on the farm is just so much easier in those ways. I finally had to choose between assimilating into lawyer culture, and telling them clearly, here's the deal, we have the exact same job title and salary, but I have way less money than you and I want to hang out and I can't do it in this way. I chose the latter.

Maggie: We talked about equality versus equity and not all having the exact same amount for everything because we have different needs and that's good and fine.

Bird: Another huge subject of a conversation that we had was about protection and the idea of whether or not to have some sort of contract, or what kinds of agreements we were making. The conversation really started with the people who had the most class privilege wanting protection, so that they could essentially keep their privilege and not in some sort of unknown future lose their money that they still felt ownership over. But then it drastically shifted towards how do we protect the people who have the least class privilege in the case of any sort of dissolving or shifting of the relationships here,

how do we protect them from being screwed and not having any sort of financial security.

Maggie: We really had to build a lot of trust with each other that existed off of paper. We also had to accept the reality that there's nothing that's going to totally protect us from the fact that who we are, what we're doing and the way we're choosing to live is not sanctioned by the overlords. And there's no way that we can actually fit ourselves into their laws and their contracts that's not going to be able to just be torn apart by anybody that has the most privilege and can go out there and get somebody professional to tear it apart. That's just the reality. And so we spent a chunk of time just really trying to trust each other and not have it on paper. And then we went through a horribly traumatizing years long divorce with someone who came in with the most cash on hand and the most financial privilege and when he left us he tried to take us for everything we had, money and otherwise. As a cis passing white man, he was able to use the courts against us in what was essentially a witch hunt. It worked better for him than we could have even imagined. Long story short, we just barely survived it and have become even stronger as a family because of it. That experience also changed a lot about the ways we thought about protection and initiated a process of trying as hard as we could to create something that would fit within the laws of the overlords to prevent that from happening again.

Question 3: What arrangements have you made to share resources and to take responsibility for each other's financial burdens?

Cait: So, big picture we have all of our money together in one bank account, actually many different accounts where we keep our reparations, money for savings for whatever big thing(s) we're saving up for. We also each have individual bank accounts where we put our "personal money." And we have a shared mortgage on our home that was sort of strategically choiceful about who was on the mortgage, and different people who are on the title of the home. Those arrangements were made based on who could be on there so we would actually qualify for a mortgage and while also wanting to have the broadest ownership possible, so that anything that we actually do own on paper can be as legally shared amongst as many people as possible, though it has not been possible for it to be legally shared amongst everybody. There isn't really a legal way to share debt, but we do also share all of our debt and we have different strategies about how we deal with different debt. We've paid off some debts. Others we have not.

Maggie: There is no legal way for us to function and be recognized as the family that we are in the country that we live in with the dominating government that we have. We can't legally exist as a family. I want to share with anyone who wants to pursue the kind of life that we are living, because I believe that it is good and right, the strategies that we use, and it's not clear cut and it's also risky for us to fully share in a lot of ways and if we had the option to legally join and marry under the laws of the land, then our financial

security would be a lot easier for us to navigate. Our health insurance and our homeowners insurance and our car insurance and our flood insurance and our debts and our bank accounts—all these things are a constant dance of trying to do what we can to operate as “individuals” or certain subsets of people who are legally married, when it just doesn’t reflect our reality at all. It’s a type of really intense discrimination that we face. We have to hang up on a lot of customer service representatives when we reach points where the person we’re talking to is just so confused and can’t help us anymore and we just have to start again, and hope for somebody a little bit more open minded—it really sucks. And it’s like, funny haha, but also it puts us in an extremely precarious position where we just don’t have any legal protections and we can’t access them.

Sayer: In regards to sharing resources, there are many kinds that we value. Cait and I work in money making jobs that are in professional fields. And we have done a lot of work to constantly ask the question: “what are all the other kinds of work that make our life so beautiful, that are invisibilized or undervalued.” For example, all of the farm work, the work in the house, making food and raising children, emotional labor, spiritual labor. Figuring out our systems for sharing those resources has been such a process with so many iterations: more meetings, less meetings, different weekly structures, abolishing the week altogether and doing 10 day cycles—we’ve tried it all. I get to eat a delicious and nutritious meal every night and I make dinner about once a week. And we have a garden that’s so beautiful and the source of so much abundance and fresh, nutritious and delicious food and also the source of so much spiritual and relationship work that’s deeply enriching to our lives.

Cait: In the same way that money is fully shared amongst all of us, how we allocate our time is also collectively held, so someone else can put something in the calendar for you and say, on this day you’re moving the fridge for example, after this meeting. Something that Silas initially observed was that as we unspelled some of our capitalist attachments to money and material possessions, a lot of that energy transferred over to time—how we manage our time resources, how to balance time spent for the collective versus personal time that no one else has a say about—it’s all been part of the process.

Maggie: We are in an ongoing process to be able to truly sense and respond to one another’s needs. An aspect of relearning our inherent belonging to the Earth is learning how to be an ecosystem, and a functional part of one that involves not just human beings. But even within just our human community, with one another, we are in a process of relearning to be sensitive, observant, and interdependent enough to sense, hear, and respond to one another’s needs in a way that reflects what our personal resources are, our capacities are at that moment in time, and the needs of the whole group and the needs of each individual. And that is very much still an alive process. And I think it always will be. I see how much we’ve grown but we really are in a point right

now about refocusing and looking at our resource distribution as a family in terms of energy, and where it's being disproportionately allocated, where we have incredible need and how to respond to that in a natural, organic and emergent way.

I could say one more thing about the logistical side of money, which is that it can be a nightmare with this many people. We've tried so many different solutions, and the more we can reach out to and find and build relationships with others who are living in similar ways, I feel excited about the possibilities of learning from one another. And there are always times where we're like, man, if we could create a software that would combine everything that we had known about how to budget and how to spend and what to do with all these systems that are so disconnected from each other and just literally built to confuse you, we could really share this as a resource with others.

Sayer: One of our main arrangements for sharing resources is we have a group of us who are the Budgeteers and a group of us who are the Fine Nancy's aka finance group. Currently, and for a little while, Bird, Marky, and I have been the budget realmie. In the Budget Realmie, we track monthly income and spending, and create monthly budget sheets. The Finance Realmie deals with long term planning, savings pots and goals. The Budgeteers let the Nancies know how much we have left over in a month (if any) and the Nancies distribute that money amongst the pots based on our goals. Some examples of those pots are: home repairs, emergencies, health, etc.

Cait: The reparations come out first, so even in months when we've been in the red, we still pay reparations. The percentage has shifted a little bit over time depending on if we're really struggling or not but it's always somewhere between 10 and 20 percent.

Maggie: We started with doing all of our budgets in *oogle *heets and over the years we picked up Mint which is a budgeting and tracking software which is definitely not without its flaws. Now we use a combination of *oogle *heets and we just switched to Monarch budgeting software and we also use QuickBooks.

Question 4: What have been the sticky questions that remain unclear or that you've tried different experiments about?

Silas: The stickiest question of all and not even because it was like the most conflictual or political or highest stakes, but it just remained sticky for a long time was "what is personal money." And it's also something we tried, a lot of experiments around even if they were thought experiments. Our monthly budget spreads out all these areas of spending that our collective agrees needs to happen regularly. And for most of our time together as a family that has been pretty tight and we've been sort of mostly able to meet those needs that we agree as a collective are our collective needs and maintain our commitments to reparations and land back and mutual aid. And occasionally,

although increasingly so, we have been allotted chunks of money that get sent to our personal bank accounts. And wow, so much strife around that: some people really struggling with spending it at all, a lot of scarcity or a feeling of: I just have to hang on to this. Some people spending it with ease and then running out. There is a lot of overlap with the what are wants and needs conversation because some people were or are more accustomed to spending cash on their physical and mental health needs and so would be more drawn to doing that. While other people who were more accustomed to having those things covered by either insurance or other family members, would not be getting those things for themselves with their personal money out of a feeling that they need to save this for strictly frivolous pleasurable things. But then the question arises: What do I even want? Here I am now and my “basic needs” are being met by the collective budget, and I have this cash on the side, so what do I spend it on?

Maggie: There’s just so much material available here in this question. And it shows many aspects of privilege. For example, if you’re a person who has chronic illness or chronic pain, and you’re using your personal money to pay for the health care that you need, and another person does not have any chronic illnesses or chronic pain and is using all their personal money to just buy things that feel pleasurable that they want on top of everything else. Again, referring back to that thing about equality versus equity. That informs us about where we need to move and shift even further.

Another sticky question from the days of yore is “how much fuck the cops.” Which was a catchall phrase for basically anything government or dominant paradigm related. We did all come in with varying levels of understanding about how corrupt the systems are that we interact with and what our responsibilities, our needs based on our social location, and our values around subverting those systems, denying those systems, and threatening those systems are. And we have evolved into more togetherness on that but especially at the very beginning I remember “how much fuck the cops” could even stop a meeting, because we would come to a point where there was way too much dissonance in our beliefs, our experience, and our willingness to challenge systems and threaten systems to even keep this conversation going right now.

Silas: “How much fuck the cops” really influenced every aspect of our lives. Going back to the early days of contract making, it was a big part of identifying the reality that some of the early inclinations towards a contract were to protect the hoarded wealth of those who already had it. And when the question and quotes emerged, it was just kind of a helpful- we have many of these now- sound bite to pause and mention: “in this conversation, I’m feeling the how much fuck the cops question.” As we started to formulate some of our plans about how we could impact actual change on the lives of the people within our community, meaning securing more people’s livelihood, future and possible safety and wellbeing, as well as moving some of our money in directions that were aligned with our mutual aid values, we had to recognize that we were coming into territory where the systems weren’t currently in place to support our beliefs and

our actions. Depending on how we maneuvered through them, there were places where we could be in danger of being reprimanded or getting in trouble. And for some people, especially the people with more class privilege, and more patterned conformity and willingness to go along, and stakes in the status quo, it was really challenging to imagine breaking rules or stepping outside of normative expectations. So how much fuck the cops in a financial way, came to really represent: how much are we as a collective willing to actually, physically do the things with our actual money and our names that will ensure the most radical collective healing and well-being, despite what is in place systematically for us to be validated, recognized, or approaching things in a legal way?

Maggie: Even among supposedly very radical communities out there, my experience is that there's still a lot of power in the lie that it's possible to cooperate with all of the systems of oppression that we live under, and still be radical or still pursue the most true and right shining abundant reality that we are trying to go for. And we had to work out a lot of kinks to be in shared opinion about that.

Silas: After all these years of asking the question "how much fuck the cops" the stickiness has really gone away and those who have stuck it out are really on the same page now about what the answer is: "a whole helluva lot...one hundred percent actually"

Another area of stickiness has to do with inherited wealth, and the wealth that is available in some of our families of origin and the conversations that are needed to be had with those families of origin. Some of whom have come to value and respect us as a family to varying degrees, and some who feel open and inclined to treat everyone in this household as a partner to their offspring. But that's been sticky and it puts a lot of pressure on the offspring of those parents who have money and resources to share to be having a lot of really hard conversations.

Maggie: The tension with families of origin and wealth feels like it's on the outside of us in a way that we get stuck to, that prevents us from moving toward each other. But when we are able to move toward each other, it feels less tense, and it feels more like we are united in a way that can bolster us to spread those conversations further. I want to acknowledge how scary that is, not just among our families of origin, but just speaking out. We have had experiences of violence against us that have really impacted our voices and our abilities to share and speak out about what we're doing, what we believe. And as it relates to these conversations with family of origin, it's a big deal to come out and say I'm going in a completely different direction. I'm going in a direction that threatens everything that I have been taught and threatens things that people who are close to me hold valuable. Right now we're in a stage of feeling less sticky in our inner core but more afraid when we try to push outward and spread and share and just be ourselves out there.

Silas: There is a huge sticky conversation that has to do with our family planning and the reality that we have a complex relationship to incredible abundance and security as well as limitations and scarcity. We've always had the plan to build another house on the land here for Bird and I to live in to open more space in this main house, especially for the children that are going to come and continue to be born into this family. And we're extremely financially limited largely because of some of that violence that we've incurred systemically through that time we talked about, and because of the reality of our financial limitations. In the process of family planning, we're trying to do the work of prioritizing the different needs, wants, and desired timelines. Weighing the costs, whether they be money or labors: emotional, physical, and spiritual of building a new house, versus having another baby. So much is required of both of those processes, and we're doing our best to not have them be pitted against each other.

Question 5: What does maintenance of the financial part of your relationships look like? You mentioned having many retreats about finances. Can you say more about what kinds of topics those have covered or what methods you've used to work things out?

Silas: Since 2019, we have had yearly Finance Concentrations, which tend to be a long weekend where we sit in all day sessions together and we share the work of facilitation. In the weeks leading up we're asking ourselves, what's up financially right now? What do we need to talk about, process, grieve, learn more about, make plans about? Then we create an overall structure of sessions, usually four or five a day, and go through those things. Some examples of sessions:

- Value, Contribution, and Division of Labor AKA *Web of Support*
- Gender, Relationship, Family Structure and Power
- Insurance, Savings and Retirement
- Reflecting on and Visioning about Mutual Aid/Reparations
- Presencing Ourselves with the Interdependence of This Land

One thing I want to talk about is the more psycho-spiritual aspect of things that we tend to work on, whether it is opening space for grief, whether it's utilizing techniques of dream work or process work. We use these more mythopoetic and dreamy psychospiritual techniques to presence the raw materials in each individual and then allow them to enter the collective field where we're able to work those energies as a group through various embodiment practices. This has been a big part of the really necessary processing of concepts, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that live in our cellular bodies, and being able to express and move through a lot of the inherited curses of capitalism and white supremacy and everything that we're desiring to subvert.

Maggie: Another important aspect of the concentrations is them being an opportunity for cultivating deeper trust in one another to see and name what is underlying any type of process or conflict. Especially, across the strata of class privilege, being able to cultivate a really deep and boundless trust in one another, and those of us who have experienced more oppression and violence

Silas: In regards to the trust, we have learned to trust the most oppressed voices in the conversation that is about the specific system of oppression. And around finances and class that's been such a powerful and potent thing, because it means that the folks who are more accustomed to being the smartest and the most relied upon and trusted voices in the room have to go through the removing of the layers. Because we can say cultivate trust, but that actually also means really recognizing where there isn't trust and recognizing why.

Sayer: That leads me to one aspect of that, which is shame and self worth. I am remembering conversations we've had about classism where Silas really invited us to ground into our self worth, into our belonging to the earth. Because one of the big things that has come up for those of us from more wealth is when we begin unlearning our classism and entitlement, there is a lot of shame. And part of that is because our sense of worth came from a sense of superiority. And so when we unlearn that superiority, then we're like, oh, wait, am I the worst? Do I have value? And sourcing that value from somewhere else was a really important part of the relationship work that we've done to be able to show up in conversations in whole ways. Instead of just oscillating quickly between superiority and total shame and lack of self worth.

Maggie: Thanks, Sayer, because that also jogs something for me about this concept of trust too. It's like, who should be trusted is totally twisted and flipped by patriarchal capitalism. And the part of the superiority is a feeling of like, of course, I am trusted and I should be trusted and everyone around me should trust me. When in reality, anyone who's coming in with privilege that's based on a dominant violent system of oppression is the least trustworthy. And I had an experience very early on before we even started fully sharing our finances where I was talking with an extended family member who said "I'm so concerned about what you're doing and how are you going to protect yourself from, [basically what was implied was] these mischievous freeloaders that are going to try to take all your money away." I was being told, beware, poor people are threats to you. But actually, I'm a threat to them. There was this metaphor spoken of wolves and sheep but I am 100% the wolf in this situation. That needs to be understood, and it really is not. I feel like what goes wrong a lot of the time is when people are like, "Oh, I would never harm anyone, I would never wield my privilege against another." And a part of the way to actually stop those within my DNA body, the rushing course of violent legacy that's behind me and my ancestry and the power that's needed to actually stop it in its tracks is being like, "Oh, I could, and I will not." Versus denying and sidestepping the untrustworthiness that goes back and back and back and back. And back.

Silas: I also think that maintenance of the financial part of our relationships looks like tending to each other's wellbeing and being aware of the ways that each other need to be cared for and need to be met in both their suffering and in their thriving and taking it upon ourselves individually and collectively to fund each other one way or another.

Sayer: I want to presence something fun, which is the registries. We all have gift registries. Silas one time was like, I'm making a gift registry, everyone should make one, it's so fun. And now part of our culture is that we all have gift registries and it's been really nice for people's birthdays definitely, but also if you want to show somebody some love, somebody's having a hard time or you were thoughtless to someone and you want to give them a little gift as a sorry, or somebody did something really nice for you and you want to give them a little gift as a thank you. We also have one for the whole family and it has been an interesting experiment in exchange. When we have longer term visitors who ask if they can give us some money for groceries we tell them about our family gift registry. It has been a really fun element of our financial relationships.

Question 6: Are there things you have learned about work and money that you think might be useful for others interested in similar experiments?

Mark: I have learned that capitalism is bad and it taught me bad things about myself and what life can be like. I've been reflecting recently on how in my entire life of jobs and work before I moved here, I never once had a job with a chair or where sitting down was an option. And I can feel the part of me that thinks that's cool and it feels really related to a part of my experience that I've been seeing more and more clearly the more time I spend here, which is how much of my worth and dignity I wrap up in what I'm able to do or what the outcomes of my labors are. How hard for me to think that it's worth my while to have a rest day or have a day spent in cultivating my beautiful inner landscape. I really like doing stuff in the tangible, physical realms, I like to fix stuff and make stuff and I really like DIY. And my endeavors or my labors or the collective endeavors that I hold leadership around are things that are very obvious and visible. It's a stack of firewood. It's a physical structure or a vehicle that stops, things where anyone can show up and say, "Wow, look at that." And that's not true of a lot of different kinds of labor, whether it's the spiritual visioning, spiritual guidance, the deep emotional labor that is the backbone of our ability to function and wake up in the morning. The stuff that I do is stuff that capitalism is good at quantifying and are things that people are accustomed to interacting with within capitalism.

I'm one of the people that lives here and does not have a j-o-b out there in the world generating income, which is great, because I've always been pretty bad at that. I noticed that for a while being here and trying to explain to people what my life is like, I would always say something like, "yeah, I don't have a job but I save us a lot of money" or "I don't generate us income, but I do a lot of stuff that keeps us from needing to pay

someone else to do it.” This was a way to try and prove my worth via capitalism... but recently I’ve just stopped doing that. When people see or compliment the fruits of my labor here, I feel like I really receive it because I believe that what I do is beautiful and worthy of celebration. And I also really try to turn people’s attention towards the collective everything that is required in order for anything here to happen or to exist.

Cait: I want to speak to a specific subset of possible readers of this, who are people from privileged class backgrounds, which I am, and people who continue to work for money while doing the work of unspelling capitalism especially in highly societally-respected white collar kinds of work. We’re the ones who have a lot of the money and it would be really cool if more of us gave away more of that money. So as I’ve been thinking about what I’ve learned, I mostly want to give a pep talk to all the rich white collar workers out there. And I think the things that I’ve learned, one of the big ones Sayer already spoke to around superiority, entitlement and self worth. I learned I have to find my self worth in other places.

Another thing is about how much nicer it is to give away your money than to hold on to it... it just feels better. Especially in the process of building the relationships where that is really meaningful. Really deepening, deepening, deepening the understanding that when I say “your” money, the *your* is in such big quote marks. Just like, it’s not your money, it never was your money, it’s still not your money. Which doesn’t mean you’re not working hard for it. And that is a separate issue. And the reason my work is valued in the way that it is, my particular kind of white collar trade of psychiatry, is not because it’s that awesome. It’s because the AMA, which is basically a slave owning organization, lobbied the government over and over and over to keep doctors rich. And insurance companies lobby. You know, it’s not you. You’re not the reason you have a lot of money even though you work hard. And when you have that money and you just have it and you’re holding on to it, it is poisonous. It’s poisonous money. And you can take the poison out of it by letting it move and breathe and be free and be redistributed. And it just feels better. You will feel better, you will feel better.

The other thing [I’ve learned] is about the real costs to yourself of continuing to interact with paid work and with whatever governmental or business or institutions and cultural norms and things that you have to interact with, in order to continue to do work for money. They come with a toll and it’s really easy to take that toll on you and to use that to feed the sense of superiority or of deservingness. Don’t do that. Capitalist labor is very individualized– it’s not a thing where multiple people have one job, which is not true outside of capitalism. Outside of capitalism, we all have the same job, or we have a lot of overlapping jobs. And within capitalism, it’s this very individual thing where one person has one work that they do and they receive the money for the one work that they do. And it’s easy to get sucked into that, or trapped in that mindset. And that can really be wiggled loose a lot. So just think about all the ways that you can, even as you’re one person doing your one job, collectivize the impact and ease the impact of still

having to engage with capitalism. Learn to ask for help. I get a lot of help for my mental health, which is impacted by having to do some of the stupid shit I have to do. I get practical help with doing the administrative stuff, get material help with making my office a nice place that doesn't suck to be in. Bringing that collectivist attitude to this very individualized paradigm can really ease the way a lot.

Silas: And on the other side of the spectrum, I'm thinking about my experience as a person who grew up poor and in my early adult life worked so many jobs with no chairs. Currently, I'm a person who is also not collecting very serious, meaningful income for most of the work that I do. It's an ongoing and living process to do the beautiful untangling of working in ways that are nourishing and providing for myself and my family while honoring the limitations of my body and my needs for rest and pleasure. It goes in all directions. For example, I have learned and grown into (and there's still more growing to do) around recognizing how much of my work I find pleasurable, and releasing the attitude of: I've been working all day so that I could prove that I've been contributing. When my truth is I've had a really great day doing what I was doing with myself and my body. And that requires collective participation too because I need my people to recognize the work I do as work whether or not I'm enjoying it.

Another direction is in our family's ongoing abolishing of Gregorian time. I'm asking myself: if I don't have a weekend, when am I working and when am I resting? I've gotten to the point of queering my lifestyle in a way where everything could be work and everything could be rest and everything could be recreational. In this family I have the opportunity to explore or observe the larger rhythms or the larger waves and seasons of productivity or not productivity. This makes me think of tough conversations along the way where we've been trying to harness a good and healthy harmony around upholding one of the anti-capitalist attitudes that is: productivity is not the end-all be-all of our daily life. We want to challenge and threaten any systems that say produce, produce, produce. But it's a slippery slope of needing to recognize when any one of us might be leaning on any of our values in a way that's actually avoiding growth, necessary labor, change, movement, whatever it is. In this family, in this life, there's so much more room to deepen into the complexities of all of our values instead of maintaining a surface level engagement with them.

Circling back, as a person who doesn't make money for a living and who has for 12 years been in these relationships of love and conflict with people who all come from class backgrounds of way more access to wealth and way more privilege than mine, a huge real struggle for me has been ever *not* working. Because I feel like I have to prove that I'm a contributor and that I have value in the family because there's no money coming in from my biological family. There never will be. If anything, there will be the opposite and I will need or want to put money towards my biological family. And I don't have an income earning potential, so if you want me to get out there and go to work, I will make minimum wage. The discovery of how stupid that is, when I exist in this family with

people who have the potential to earn an income that can sustain a family this large, the visceral realization of how stupid it is to be forced to put your body on the line and the types of labor that are out there for minimum wage, it's just so offensive. And in the context of our family, the amount of money that I could bring in is so much less than what my contributions could be if my time were not spent at a job that paid me that money. I know that but I have needed and still need, less and less frequently though, the reassurance from my family members that I am contributing in big and meaningful ways. It's just a really interesting spectrum, slash circle, between the different class backgrounds where we all actually are wounded in the same way by capitalism and the wound at the core is the same. And it's like, Am I worthy? Do I belong? Am I good enough? Am I doing enough? And just the way that it gets triggered or expressed I think is different.

Resources that have deeply influenced us over the years:

- *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic* by **Martín Prechtel**
- *Emergent Strategy* by **adrienne maree brown**
- *Stay and Fight* by **madeline ffitich**
- *The Fifth Sacred Thing* by **Starhawk**
- *Faggots and their Friends Between Revolutions* by **Larry Mitchell and Ned Asta**
- *Dune* by **Frank Herbert**
- *Conflict is Not Abuse* by **Sarah Schulman**
- *The Gift* by **Lewis Hyde**
- all of **Octavia Butler's** work

Also, **Rain Crowe**, who is an educating witch that has supported me and us so much in our practice of holding our European descent and decolonizing movement work stuff. Our mentors at *Northwest Soulquest*, **Anne and Sheila**; Emmy Smith-Stewart and Jeffrey Aczevedo's plays; the more radical aspects of Jewish tradition that are inherently anti-capitalist and earth based; **Adamah**; **The Icarus Project**; **Fever Ray** and **The Knife**; **DakhaBrakha**, mad resistance movement; **Short Mountain** radical faery sanctuary, Soteria house; student cooperative organizing; living in Sherwood co-op and doing co-op life.

INTERVIEW WITH LOREE ERICKSON ABOUT HER CARE COLLECTIVE - Dean Spade, preface by Loree Erickson

I recorded this conversation with Dean in May of 2018. Since then, so much has happened personally and politically, as if those two things are ever separate. A week after this interview my mom passed away — kind of unexpectedly, kind of not. She was living in a state-funded long-term care facility in Virginia and died of complications due to pressure sores, one of the many deadly consequences of institutional care that is not actually caring. Just under 2 years later, with the pandemic, we were given a massive-scale picture of what happens when as a society we don't care about care. What happens when systems of power and certain individuals are working hard to deny our interdependence with one another and with more-than-human life like the land, air, and water. During these times, we also see moments and movements of resistance. Communities coming together and practising cultivating and creating caring worlds for all of us, not just some of us. There is so much I want to say about COVID and the ways it impacted my care collective, and important lessons about the relationship between care and liberation that I don't have the capacity to say here. In the interview, I talk about how thanks to my care collective, I have all these beautiful little moments in the bathroom to draw on. During the height of the pandemic when everyone in the collective was stressed out, scared and struggling to figure out how to get through this hard time together, we were deeply appreciative of the care collective. Care shifts were a space for connection and intimacy, laughter and comfort.

I go into more detail in my interview, but I started my care collective in 1999 in Richmond, Virginia with a few of my closest friends because of the combination of bureaucratic confines around care funding structures and the limitations of institutional care. These issues persist and in many ways are worsening. Skyrocketing costs of living, lack of accessible affordable housing, and a gutting of social services all lead to people not getting what they need to survive. Over the years I have met with many people to help them start their own care collectives. I started my website cultivatingcollectivecare.com to provide a community hub for folks wanting to share questions and strategies around navigating these difficulties. One example that really stood out to me was a person in Montréal who needed to create support because the care systems they had in place were on a rigid time schedule and if their paratransit was late (and they so often are) the person would have to choose between going to the washroom and eating dinner.

When I moved to Canada, I wasn't eligible for any government support because I wasn't a permanent resident or citizen. The Canadian immigration system, like all immigration systems, is built upon colonialist, racist, classist and disablist notions of who is a desirable citizen. After many years and so many hoops and struggles I got permanent

residency. I decided to pursue the government funding support for care to supplement and support care collective members who were really struggling financially. It was my hope that Direct Funding would be a resource to support folks who were supporting me. I had to wait 2 ½ years on the waiting list and then undergo an arduous interview that lasted 4 ½ hours to prove that I have the capacity to manage and direct my care.

In theory the goal of this program is to allow folks with disabilities to have control over their care. A part of this interview included an assessment of my care needs to determine the number of hours I would be allocated. At one point I was being questioned about why I needed folks to stay in the bathroom with me while I was on the toilet. Surely it would be a better use of time to have folks doing other tasks during this time. When I explained that in addition to it being my preference it is also for safety, so I don't fall off the toilet, their suggestion was for me to be seatbelted to the toilet so that my care shifters could fold a couple of towels while I am using the bathroom. I share this story to highlight the persistence of 'institutional care' approaches to care even within this supposedly person-centred approach. Currently my care collective is still made up of fabulous people of all sorts of identities and experiences from the various communities I am a part of. Just now, some of them are volunteer and some get paid. It has been an interesting and complicated process trying to combine my transformative justice and disability justice approach to care with this neoliberal self-manager model.

A few years ago I was invited by Sean Lee at Tangled Art Gallery to host a crip community night. As this event was a collaboration with an art group called Public Sweat I put together a series of queercrip bath moments, and the creation of my new short video called "Glitter bath!" "Glitter bath!" invites us to bathe in femmegimp excess and luxuriate in the very sites of shame which are marked systemically and structurally as the terms of exclusion and erasure. Just as my body is held, nourished and supported by the warm glittery water, care collectives make possible the conditions for marginalized communities to not only survive, but thrive. You can't get farther from institutional care models than a glitter bath as supported by a care collective. In addition to the video, I've created a triptych and artist statement published in *Feral Feminisms* (Summer 2024) if you are interested in seeing this work.

Building on this celebration of the relationship between collective care and love with collective liberation, I am currently working on a podcast series called "Take Care of Each Other". Primarily the podcast will be conversations amongst past and present care collective members to share the wisdom and skills we have learned together. I am naming it "Take Care of Each Other" in part because that's what care collectives do, and also for my mom. Whenever we were saying goodbye after a visit, she would tell me and my friends or partners to take care of each other. Look to my website for an episode in the coming year.

Dean Spade: Would you be willing to talk about what disability justice as a concept or a framework means to you?

Loree Erickson: I love talking about disability justice. Disability justice makes necessary interventions into mainstream and historic disability organizing that have tended to be more single issue, and to center white disabled people's experiences and needs. Inherent to disability justice is an intersectional or interlocking analysis connected with collective liberation that centers the people who are the most impacted. And I think that what's really crucial, disability justice is really helpful in that it allows us to look at the ways that, historically, white supremacy, and heterosexism and cissexism and colonization and disablism – all of these systems – have all worked in concert to produce marginalization and rob people who are marginalized (or who are not part of the constructed illusory norm) of personhood, and then use that to justify itself. We can't understand how to make a just world if we're not looking at how all of these systems interconnect, and I think that's one of the most powerful pieces of a disability justice framework. I try, as a white disabled activist, to amplify the voices of disabled people of color who are doing disability justice work, and I think that's really important. I also try to call out and engage in conversation with other white disabled activists any time I feel like they need a bit of a reminder that ending white supremacy is an important part of all our liberation.

The other piece that I really love about disability justice is how by recognizing our beautiful complex wholeness as people in the world, DJ really flips and refutes notions of deficiency that are so commonly attached to disability, like disability itself means a lacking or a loss of ability. So, I think that disability justice works to highlight the ways that disability actually adds so much to our worlds, and how accessibility makes our world better for everyone who's in it, not just disabled people. Disability justice highlights how interdependence is such an important aspect of all of our lives as well, and pushes back against capitalism and other structural and social arrangements that just harm us all. It also shares Crip knowledge and wisdom and magic and beauty and all of those things in a way that shows how disability is necessary and vital and creative, rather than being this sort of unwanted thing.

D: I'd be curious to hear what disability justice lets you imagine or want the world to be like. I think there are people who are craving both that analysis of what we don't have and what we're pushing against, and also that creativity and beauty you're talking about.

L: One thing I really like is that it's not always necessarily this big grand vision, particularly because so much of how I enact disability justice on a daily basis is through collective care. There are all these countless beautiful moments that I have with other people – disabled people and non-disabled people and people who aren't sure where they fit in the whole scheme of things or among various labels. But I have all these

beautiful moments — where we're laughing and we're crying because we're trying to figure things out for somebody who just broke up with their partner and they're so sad about it. So, like, I'm sitting on the toilet and they're sitting beside me on a chair or on the tub or on the ground and we're just, like, talking while care is happening, going every which way. And my cat is always in the room: in those moments she likes to come and sit on my wheelchair and get attention and love. So it's a very collective moment, where we can just sort of be however we are in that moment, whether we feel like joking about things or talking about a new TV show that we're all obsessively watching, or plotting the next revolutionary action that we're all going to do, or crying because something horrible has just happened and we're all feeling that too. For me, that's the magic, those subtle moments of connection. It's a really unique, beautiful experience that I think is transformative for everyone who is involved in it. But it's also the kind of thing that you don't realize is transformative until later. You're thinking about it and you're like, "Oh wait, that was really powerful."

I also think about my dissertation project, which was making a queercrip porn with queercrip folks, some who had made queercrip porn before and some who had not. I was the porn fairy godmother, and so I would sit down and chat with folks and be like, "What are your dreams and hopes and fantasies for making porn?" And then I would figure out with them what they needed to make that happen, and then we made these amazing scenes. There were six scenes that were filmed around my dissertation and those moments were also making radical access and access intimacy and all of these things while also making porn. It was about facilitating people being able to bring their whole selves to this moment in time. Then that moment in time was witnessed by everyone in the room, witnessed and experienced by everyone in the room, and then also recorded. Shortly after we had filmed one of the scenes, this amazing Afro-futurist, queercrip, kinky, nerdy, porn scene, one of my collaborators went out later that night to a queer party. Something happened at the party, I don't remember what, that left my collaborator feeling some of those 'culture of undesirability' issues and really feeling like they took a big hit. But in that moment, they realized that they had a whole beautiful golden nugget of queercrip joy, pleasure, and magic that they could just draw on if they needed to counter the culture of undesirability moments, and that was a resource they had never had before. There is also a ripple effect: these scenes, once they're put out into the world and into community, will be a continued resource and source of moments of joy – queercrip joy – and pleasure and all of those things. In moments like these, I recognize disability justice being enacted, as much as I recognize it when people shut down inaccessible transit, or protest by sitting in front of buses, or any of the numerous things that disability activists do.

D: Will you just say what 'culture of undesirability' is?

L: Yeah, so, 'culture of undesirability' is a conceptual framework to talk about the ways that marginalized people are constructed as unwanted and dangerous and disposable. I

came up with this terminology because I was doing a lot of work around sexuality and sexiness and disability, and I was bumping into the limits of reclaiming things. So it's not just about showing how some disabled people are sexy in all the ways that normatively desirable people are sexy. And I knew that it wasn't as simple as just including disabled people into existing markers of desirability, so I wanted language that actually spoke to all of the moments and systems that construct marginalized people as undesirable, as unwanted, as disposable, and that made connections with those practices across lines of race and class and disability and size and gender and all of those different things. I also wanted to connect the term to eugenics – both historical and contemporary experiences of eugenics – because I think that's such a huge part of the how and why behind all of those things that lead disabled people and marginalized people to be seen as 'too much' or 'too little'.

D: That's really helpful. Will you share any impressions you've had of seeing the recent disability justice activism around health care access happening in the US responding to attacks on health care access?

L: Yeah, as somebody who is a US citizen who now lives in Canada, it's incredibly necessary and important and also, I think, really refreshing to see the politicized disability justice organizing that's happening – as part of other movements and as part of the intersectional analysis that's happening where people are making the links between these different oppressive systems. When I still lived in the States (that was almost 20 years ago), I remember that I tried to have a direct action disability meeting in 2002 or something, and nobody showed up – none of the non-disabled lefty activists, no disabled people, *no one* showed up. I was very established within various activist communities – this was in Richmond, Virginia – and so it was just very disheartening. So, it's really great for me to see all of the activism happening. Disabled voices are so crucial when we think about healthcare reform and healthcare justice and all of those things. We need to hear disabled people's experiences and how we think justice looks like, what justice feels like.

D: Thank you. Will you talk about your care collective, how it works and what it is like?

L: So, almost 25 years ago I started meeting all of my care needs, or the majority of my care needs, through my community and through different people in my community. It started off in response to inadequacies in government funding. I couldn't actually find anyone who would work as a care attendant for the tiny, tiny, tiny amount of money that the government was offering to pay for care. Also, a lot of the care that I received through agencies was from care workers who were very homophobic in lots of different ways (with, of course, lots of lovely exceptions). I had attendants complain to the agency that I was watching pornography (not that there's anything wrong with watching pornography) when I was watching "Go Fish" (it was the 90s!), I had folks leave their shifts early without telling me when I had parties or groups of friends over –

too many queers! This left me without a way to go to the bathroom or get into bed. I had a hard time finding attendants when I lived at Queer Paradise, a queer collective house/community space. In response to those two major things, and with my friends and I being very immersed within other sorts of social justice organizing projects like Food Not Bombs and prisoner justice work and those sorts of things, we decided that the best solution to make sure that I could do things like get out of bed in the morning was just for us as a community to meet my care needs. It was also an early articulation of thinking about how we re-center needs, so that it's not just "disabled people have more needs than non-disabled people." I was a part of the community, and part of what I needed to be in this community was to be able to go to the bathroom and get out of bed and those sorts of things.

It was also about collective access, and those were not words or language we had back in 1999, but that's what we were doing. A bunch of different incarnations and experiments with my care collective have developed over the years due to me just living my life subject to government funding structures that never allow you to actually be who you are. The bureaucratic limits around care funding in effect are telling you what you can and cannot do with your life. You know, they're like, "Well, you can't go to Canada and be an international student because we're not going to pay for any of your care, you can't work this job because we won't fund care outside your home, you can't be queer because you won't find folks who are comfortable being around queer people, you can't live collectively because attendants are only supposed to wash your dishes". Another part of collective care for me is that it allows me to live my life, it allows me to be all of the things that I am, and to be that in community. It also really allows all of the people who are in the care collective, not just me, to be all of who and what they are and to bring that to the moments of care. One part of collective care that I love, at least the way that I and my collective do care, is that it disrupts a bunch of different binaries: it disrupts the cared for vs. caregiver binary, it disrupts non-disabled care provider vs. disabled recipient. While in more traditional ways of doing care, often those people doing the caring are also disabled, they're not really allowed to be their full selves, they have to just do their job and be only in one role. Because of capitalism and disablism, they're not able to be there as both disabled and caregiving folks, right? They have to, like, disappear that part of themselves. The care collective allows for folks to bring their whole selves, which I think is really important.

Also, I'm not a task to be completed, right, I'm not a job for anybody. I really hate feeling that way. That's a really big part of care for me: making needs not these burdensome terrible things, but opportunities for connections and intimacy. So, those are just some of the things I really love about collective care. Collective care builds communities, I get to know people, I connect with people, they connect with each other, and it's all through care and connection and trying to enact these principles that we all hold dear in our heart.

What my care collective looks like right now is I have four care shifts a day. Because I live in Toronto, which is a pretty big city with a fairly sizable number of rad, delightful, queer, Crip, non-Crip, non-queer, just wonderful, weird people, basically the common denominator is beautiful, wonderful, weirdos. I have about 25 to 35 people who are in the care collective. I have people who do regular shifts. Like, every Tuesday night, I get to have a sleepover with Lisa, which is great. I also have people who do occasional shifts and fill in. Most people do roughly one shift a week, some people do more, some people do less.

One thing that's really beautiful about having space for both of those things is that some people are planners and some people are not, some people work jobs where they can't plan, and all sorts of other things. So, it's really about maximizing what makes it sustainable and work for most people, and that's sort of what it looks like. I now have some folks who are also doing coordinating, so that I don't have to do all of the coordinating for like 25 to 35 people – that's a lot of labour, 28 shifts a week!

There are hard things too. We're kind of constantly needing to recruit because people's lives change and people need to not be in the collective for certain periods of time to do other things in their lives, or other things come up, so it can be really hard sometimes to fill shifts. Another thing that's really beautiful about the care collective that's also one of those hard things is that it's so different than het-monogamous culture. It means that there's not a default, so if Wednesday at 5pm I don't have anyone, there's not somebody who will just do it because they're obligated to by whatever. That's a really beautiful thing, that that default is not there, but it's kind of a scary thing because it might be that nobody can come at 5pm on Wednesday. There's definitely some magic happening around the care collective because generally speaking all the shifts get filled. I've never not been able to get into bed, which I know is a reality for a lot of people who have paid care provided: people don't show up sometimes. I've never been stuck in my chair. I find that when I do my care this way, people are way more responsible and way less likely to not show up for a shift or cancel if they need to. Things happen, because we're humans, but it's way less than it was when I had agency care workers and it was their job.

Also in the care collective I really see a lot of ways in which collective care is transformative justice work. One way I see this directly is that it's also about keeping me safe because I am so immersed in community, it's not one person who's doing all of my care, which is important because I think that the isolation and burnout and fatigue and all of those things that come with traditional or institutional caregiving are recipes for abuse to happen. The fact is that it is sustainable because people do what they can do, and it's also a community so people know each other, all of those things are built in to keep me safe and keep me connected in community. People learn so much about disability justice in the bathroom or in my bedroom. There are so many different ways that people learn, and the learning that happens in collective care is a very different

kind of learning that happens in a very embodied way, which I think makes it open for more people to experience and learn from.

Dr. Loree Erickson's (she/her) activist, research, and teaching interests include disability justice, abolition, porn studies, cultures of un/desirability, queercrip porn, and media. She currently teaches at U of T and OCAD. She's an award-winning porn performer/maker. Along with other community organizing, she is a forerunner in theorizing and thriving through care collectives. She's a white settler queer femmegimp, cat lady, lover of sun, social justice and sparkly things.

SPEAKING OF SHARED MATTERS: A DIALOGUE ON GRIEF, EXISTENTIAL CARE, AND CLASS ACCOUNTABILITY - Kim Sanou and Lua Mauff, 2026

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In the end, it is about the politics of our relationships. Those who we have been told fulfill our need for care in an inevitable and natural way, and those who have been reduced to feel very limited responsibility for each other.

“Sometimes we need distance to follow a thought. Sometimes we need to give up distance to follow that thought.” Sara Ahmed - *Living a Feminist Life*. Kim: It’s clearly noticeable that navigating the overlapping dimensions of violence and destruction is taking an increasing amount of energy from everyone around us, right?

Kim: Crises are omnipresent.

And what’s interesting is, I think there has been a real shift in how quickly even casual conversations can move from a more light and surface level to a different one that makes space for sharing feelings like overwhelm, worry, or anger. I often realise this in fleeting moments, like when you meet someone on the street and pause for a chat, exchanging how are yous, or you talk to someone at the occasional event. I have also experienced, though, that shifts in the way we relate can feel a bit shaky. I’ve both sent and received apologetic texts after brief encounters where one of us shared our concern of having given off a too-negative vibe or overshared our distress. I have been socialised to stay in a zone of comfort and stability in conversations with people I don’t consider to be very close, and I reckon many people have, perhaps, to not cause each other discomfort, or radiate an attitude of expectation. But that construct seems to be getting a little bit fractured.

It feels like how we are doing, or rather how burdened most of us are moving through everyday life, is increasingly recognized as symptomatic of the political and social realities we’re navigating - both the ones we share and the ones we do not. It’s come to the point where people expect you to be down, which is an assumption based on experience, and fair enough. I’ve had moments in the last year where, in a moment of a good mood and sparkly energy, I shared that I was doing “really good,” leaving the other visibly surprised, expressing that they hadn’t heard that reply in such a long time.

I have to say, though, besides the utter despair I often feel, besides the anxiety that inhabits my bones, this gradual shift towards collectively sitting with pain is something I appreciate.

I want to look at this slightly shifted modality of my brief encounters as one step towards collectivising our increasing emotional, physical, and structural precariousness in this world.

So in this spirit, how are you?

Lua: To be honest, I struggle to respond to this question. It usually takes me some time to figure out the scope, scale, and depth with which to respond to it. Also, there is a limit on how clearly I can separate how I'm doing from the realities of those around me, the people I care about and live alongside. Many people close to me are struggling, or have been for some time, and that inevitably affects me in various ways. Not just emotionally, as I carry worry and concern, but also practically. It shapes the amount of care-work needed, influences how tasks and responsibilities are distributed at home or between the people I organize with, and ultimately impacts my ability to carve out space for myself, both in daily life and in my own head.

So, when someone asks me how I'm doing, I'm thinking: How am I and how are my close ones? Are our existential needs met? This can refer to very material things in the present and go as far as questions around affectedness by shifting and dissolving futures around us. I'm referring here to the impacts the different dimensions of crises have on our livelihoods, ideas, and hopes. Some we can hold on to, but others we have to adapt or let go.

In short, what you're writing resonates a lot with me! I have definitely noticed that shift, and I really appreciate that little space that we try to hold for each other, even in brief moments in which we can insert some of the complexities we all carry around with us.

Kim: Do you want to dive into the concept of existential care? A notion of care that will accompany us as we go on, I think. It's a term that you started using some years ago and that gradually found its way into our shared practice as well.

Lua: Essentially, the term emerged out of the desire to deepen our sense of responsibility for each other and ended up being quite useful for making a specific layer of needs (we have) and care (we need) tangible. If I were to try to define it, I would say existential care is the practice of sharing the resources, responsibilities, and labour for what is necessary to meet our physical, mental and material needs, in ways that support our sense of agency, and, ideally, our capacity for joy. Especially looking at the here and now, but also in times and in anticipation of existential crisis and the fears most of us carry around. A certain and very valuable form of accountability for each other. One that explicitly goes beyond the exchange of tips and encouragement and instead tries to look at each other's existential needs as shared matters.

That also implies very concrete questions for me: Does someone have enough money to cover food, rent, and other essential needs for their basic well-being? Is their housing situation secure? Do they have a source of income that is not only sufficient, but also sustainable, something that doesn't completely drain them? And of course, are their mental and physical health needs being met? This can look very different from person to person, ranging from regular access to medical specialists to informal or peer-organised support networks. Existential needs encompass all the conditions that must be in place for someone to feel grounded and able to envision a future with some sense of positive potentiality. Within that, I would emphasise that material conditions play a central role when I speak of existential care.

Kim: Existential care offers a very concrete container for these specific needs and desires, and at the same time, further shapes them. It also offers a certain legitimacy; there is something

empowering about it. I really appreciate emerging terminology like existential care, it's been very helpful for me and continuously informs how I relate to others.

Lua: I would like to bring up something else that I believe plays a crucial role in this shift we're seeing and feeling at the moment, and that I think is a slow, often painful, and at times, awkward move towards an engagement with grief. I understand it as more and more entangled with questions of crises and transformation, the realities this conversation is embedded in.

You called it “collectively sitting with pain” and that is also a very fitting description, because the sitting indicates a slowing down, a shift of attention, rather than an inconvenience that must be overcome. But yeah, now that the walls are closing in on even more people,¹ although at radically different speeds, there is this collective destabilisation and unease that can be clearly felt. And yes, I agree, that feels more aligned somehow.

Kim: I'm also glad you brought in grief and I think it is a good moment to invite it into the conversation. It makes me think of a situation that happened recently, actually. I had a conversation with someone from my massage training, someone my age, let's call him Thomas. We've practiced on each other a few times, and during one of our exchanges where we met at my home outside of class, I tried to open up a political dimension to what we're learning. I shared my thoughts about how massage, as a form of care, isn't equally accessible, how many people can't afford it, or don't even feel entitled to that kind of care and attention. I said I thought it was important to keep this in mind when setting our prices so that those who might need this type of attention and care the most could receive it. But we didn't connect over that at

¹When we speak, think and write about our struggles, it is important for us to recognise, that if put in relation, they are what the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective (GTDFC) identifies as low intensity struggles. This is the place we're writing from and also the place we're writing to.

ENDNOTES

Struggles have inherently different qualities: this is important to name, as people are facing genocides, displacement, deadly border regimes or the destruction of the land and ecosystems they inhabit and depend on. They describe “high-intensity” struggles as urgent efforts to defend land, life, and livelihoods against active threats, while “low-intensity” struggles aim to gain better access to resources, representation, or security within – or through partial exits from – the modern/colonial system. Though both forms of resistance are seen as essential, they emphasise a key difference: low-intensity struggles may help sustain or reform the system, while high-intensity struggles are about survival in the face of the violence that sustains that very system. Drawing on this distinction, they understand the current global order as a “modern/colonial system”, one in which modern ideals like political stability, economic security, and autonomy are underwritten by ongoing colonial violence.

Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) is an arts/research collective that aims to identify and de-activate colonial habits of being, and to gesture towards the possibility of decolonial futures through artistic, pedagogical, cartographic, and relational experiments. Sharon Stein et. al., “*Methodologies for Gesturing towards Decolonial Futures,*” in *Weaving an Otherwise: In-Relations Methodological Practice*, ed. Amanda R. Tachine and Z Nicolazzo (Routledge, 2022), 143-144.

all. It wasn't even a disagreement, more like what I said just hung there, completely unacknowledged. Still eager, or maybe already too deep in, I kept going, trying to make the connection, sharing more of my views, gradually moving away from this concrete topic towards the general pain I feel in the face of social injustice.

Looking back, I realise it came across as pretty desperate. I could sense it, and Thomas later told me that he chooses not to open himself up to that kind of "negativity." I can't lay out the entire exchange here, but what really struck me was that I think Thomas ended up feeling genuinely sorry for me. It probably didn't help that I kept repeating, I'm not sad or frustrated all the time. It makes me laugh now, but at the time, I had to sit with this deep feeling of being completely misunderstood. What for me could have led to more connection and ultimately meaningfulness and joy, to him felt like I was dragging him into my sad place. That moment stayed with me, especially the question of allowing for complexity in our encounters. And how one-dimensional this binary understanding of a "happy conversation" and a "downer conversation" is. I think, in a way, this is really connected to grief. For me it was a vehicle for connection and transformation, and for Thomas I reckon it felt like there was absolutely nothing to gain from the conversation. The evening ended after he asked me for a good Sushi place nearby and left, seeming very relaxed compared to me.

Malkia Devich-Cyril writes, "Joy is not the opposite of grief. Grief is the opposite of indifference."²

Grief can and will be linked to this conversation in various ways, I believe. I think of existential care and grief as inherently linked, because we're navigating each other's needs and wishes for a good life in a world of constant loss. I reckon even a perfect world would be one of loss, so that's fine. But as you said, there is a particular shift happening at the moment that feels different.

You wrote about shifting and dissolving futures. I feel like a lot of the people around me are in the midst of navigating this. We need to grieve for the fact that so many of us don't feel like the future we're moving towards will care for our safety. Barton writes that we need space to grieve our stolen imagination.³

So, I think it's so important to not think of grief solely as a backwards motion. Because I've essentially been taught to think of grief as something that one: one passes through, two: that once passed through constitutes some sort of closing after which one returns to the original condition and three: that it's inherently private.

But this idea of linear grief that should and can be overcome is not very helpful in my opinion. I think grief has this gift of sensitising us – it can make us receptive and present. It's almost like it adds three-dimensionality to ongoing transformations. Bayo Akomolafe speaks of grief as something that opens new worlds for us.⁴ So I try to honour it as the recognition of harm, loss, and injustice embedded in the very conditions that shape our lives.

Camille Sapara Barton writes on this note, "Tending to my grief enabled me to orient to and

²Malkia Devich-Cyril, *Freedom to Grieve: Healing, Liberation, and the Death of Loved Ones (In These Times, 2020)*.

³Camille Sapara Barton, *Tending Grief: Embodied Rituals for Holding Our Sorrow and Growing Cultures of Care in Community (North Atlantic Books, 2024)*, 14.

⁴Bayo Akomolafe, *Looking For The Cracks with Dr Bayo Akomolafe (Video on Youtube, 2024)*.

understand the power dynamics and histories I am entangled in that were keeping me separate from many of my kin.”⁵

And at the same time, we can also grieve things we're letting go because we know they no longer serve us.⁶ And something very crucial I learnt from others is, there can be agency in grief. It does not always burst upon us as if we are passively exposed to it – we can turn towards it and cultivate a relationship with it. Bringing grief into our middle and allowing it into the different dimensions of our lives is really important in order for us to move. Not forward necessarily, but perhaps it can assist us in moving sideways.

Yet I do think grief is about death, loss, and falling apart, but in a much broader sense than we tend to allow it to be.

Lua: Since grief gained a strong presence in my life in 2023, when my father, Micha, died, it has served me to stay connected to my own history as well as the current times and what happens around me. So, I resonate with much of what you've written, and also with Barton's remarks about grief dissolving feelings of separation and fostering a sense of connection and belonging.

This unlocked grief for things that, although strongly connected to my biography, go way beyond it. I was grieving the gentrification and capitalist takeover of East-Berlin, the place I grew up in and where he still lived till the end. I was grieving the escalating housing/rent crises and the increasingly challenging circumstances of making a living. I was grieving the accumulation of all these things that are pushing more and more people like my dad into poverty. I felt and saw these things before, of course, and I actively opposed them. Yet it was through this loss of him that I started to really grieve them.

Specifically, Barton's acknowledgement of stolen imagination as a source of grief made me think of him. On two levels, actually, first because it was already before his death that I began to grieve the fact that I was losing a sense of future with him. And second, because I think this type of loss was deeply engrained in his biography.

When he was 31, which is also exactly my age now, the German reunification and what followed, I guess you could say, “stole his imagination” of a different socialism emerging from the old. The GDR was gone and the basis for moving towards an anti-authoritarian socialism was a really different one. I don't think he ever wanted the old times back, but the feeling of being part of a powerful movement gesturing at a more liberated future.

Now it's more than a year ago that you, Joni and I were shoveling a hole at the head of his grave, pouring foundation and setting the just finished headstone in. It was a meaningful relief for me, marking the end of a 6-year period of navigating the challenges in our relationship, and my sometimes intense feelings of responsibility for him. It was when I realised that he had no health insurance and barely enough money to pay his rent that I was starting to rethink our relationship and the role of care within it.

⁵Camille Sapara Barton. *Tending Grief*, 36.

⁶Sobonfu Somé, *Embracing Grief: Surrendering to your sorrow has the power to heal the deepest of wounds*.

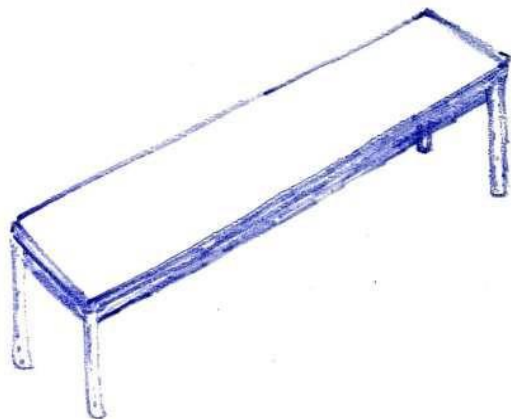
As Micha's only child, I rejected the inheritance after speaking to the debt counselling, so as not to inherit his estimated 30.000 euros of debt. What comes with this rejection, though, is that one loses the right to any material legacy of the deceased. He didn't own many things and even fewer of value, so there were only a couple of sentimental objects I would have taken with me, but the warnings by the police and debt counselling I received had intimidated me enough not to take the risk. I think it activated childhood memories of witnessing my parents, each of them individually, struggling with money and the threats and claims of state institutions. I had to suddenly realise that this still sits in my body. It was never gone, it was just waiting for the moment to properly make me feel the class-system-divide again.

That feeling was powerful enough to make me shy away from the few objects that carried deeper meaning and positive feelings for me.

I'm still grieving the loss of these objects, which would give me material continuity to him. Where is the space for class grief, I'm wondering.

The objects were the following: a wooden chair with armrests, a mirror framed in wood with tile elements and an unusually long, narrow table, and last but not least, my old blue scooter with a seat.

I will draw them.



Now that I'm over 30, living and loving in times of economic recession, I feel my background catching up with me more than ever before. The sensation of class mobility that I felt a few years ago is fading, what is emerging in its place since Micha died, is a fear of precarity and a much more conscious and realistic understanding of my lineage. It's an ambivalent feeling, but I do feel very connected now. That's not always been the case.

Some years ago, in spring I was attending a round table on anti-capitalist educational work in a ground-floor office in Berlin, Neukölln. It was right at the beginning when we were doing the introduction round with names, pronouns, plus, in this case, class positioning, when I received a text message from Micha, who I was supposed to meet later that day, asking if I could lend him 50 Euros and bring them with me.

Looking back, I wish I could have shared there how I felt getting that text instead of talking about the GDR and other significant markers in my lineage to try and give that nuanced brief account of the complex interplay of presences and absences of social, cultural, and economic capital⁷ in my and my parents' lives, which I felt was expected from me. Speaking about your class background in front of 20 people without the proper time and space for what was really important to me felt performative.

What I would have needed was a smaller setting, the un-invitation of Pierre Bourdieu, and the invitation of details, the odd stories and the awkward memories. Maybe then I would have been able to speak about what I felt, and that I knew my father must have felt too, having to ask me for money, on my visit to Berlin, not having seen me for months. I could have spoken about what I think that could have meant and said about his financial situation and his networks and contacts being dried out.

So I guess without him, I would not be writing about grief, money, and existential care.

Kim: I would like to add something, and that's the structure of support that you created around Micha, and also around yourself while supporting him. With around 5 or 6 others, I was part of this second layer with whom you discussed on a regular basis the very questions of housing and the absence of health insurance, as well as fundamental questions like self-determination and the limits of pragmatic solution finding in complex terrain.

And I have my own thoughts on this, but in retrospect, can you put your finger on what made this kind of support, this fluid process, work for you?

Lua: It all started when I got increasingly burdened and overwhelmed about the complexity of his situation. The things I had tried up to that point hadn't brought much relief or proved effective. I had already been supporting him for some time together with my aunt. Our regular phone calls were often helpful and created a sense of connection, but it all felt emotionally preloaded, shaped by old dynamics and unresolved history. Over time, I came to realise that, because of the complex and conflictual nature of their sibling relationship, this isolated setup, with just the two of us discussing and handling things, was making the

⁷Pierre Bourdieu, *Die feinen Unterschiede: Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft* (Suhrkamp, 1982).

situation more complicated and at times certain forms of support impossible.⁸

So it was around one or two years of being aware of his severe existential precarity that I got all of you involved. I believe it was crucial that I was making it about me, I was asking to be supported to support someone else. That's a relevant nuance. When I redirected this request away from the family⁹ and towards people close to me, who I knew cared about me and whose experiences and perspectives were important to me, it changed everything.

What all these meetings had in common was that they gave me the opportunity to share information, thoughts and feelings with you as a group, to ask for perspectives and perceptions and, above all, to come to joint decisions, in relation to my possibilities, not Micha's. It also meant that if sometimes we would hit a dead end, you supported me in sitting with that. That was very common actually, if you remember, and really essential. You were important witnesses to my feelings and became actively involved in questions around how and with what focus I continued my support.

That created a feeling of shared accountability, which was key for me to be protected from deeper emotional and structural harm. Making difficult decisions or often not being able to do anything at all was completely different from the point where the basis of action or non-action was a collective one. From then on, the rounds were repeated at irregular intervals whenever I felt the need and initiated them again. We had meetings in different places over the years, and also with a changing constellation of people. I remember one gathering in our communal kitchen in the countryside, and a particularly large one in my brother Max's allotment garden in Berlin.

It was a process that took years and only at the time of his death the real extent of how different we had already organised became apparent. It was people who were part of my support circle, who met the mortician with me and were able to be with me, support me, and again take many of the important decisions collectively. Death is often a moment when above all those tied by blood or law come together and take over. But in our situation, information and accountability was already spread differently, and that shifted agency and possibility. Still now I'm grateful that the structures we created and nurtured over time made a different social tissue possible that I could lean into.¹⁰ I believe the most crucial aspect that made this possible was that the structure had been built already gradually over time before. That way, in the moment of crisis, it was already in place as a powerful resource and could activate itself. But I'm curious, what are your thoughts?

Kim: I really resonate with your reflections of that time and think the role of consistency can not be emphasised enough. That's what made the difference. Having to explain the context you're embedded in is a major barrier in moments that are already overwhelming. Navigating and organising support can then even feel exhausting, rather than what you described as a tissue to "lean into". So in the end, it determines how safe it feels to shift the structural status quo.

⁸It feels important to say that he also was kind of impossible. Almost incapable of asking for or accepting help, self-determination was incredibly important to him. Which was both a source of frustration and a profound lesson on support work, boundaries and autonomy.

⁹We write *family* and other social constructs such as *friendship* in italics to make the constructed nature visible.

¹⁰And in the end, I think also my aunt could lean into.

When Micha died, the structure that I and others were part of, inhabited a space that is traditionally organised by the family. It was really interesting, many members of your family were part of the process, but the family as such was neither the base nor the center as we came together.

I wrestle a lot with how our care relations are structured and I think it's more than fair to say that the family constitutes one of the most fundamental care as well as specifically existential care constructions yet. And its meanings, implications, and contradictions are so multi-layered that attempts to deconstruct it can quickly feel like important aspects are being left out, which they surely are.

However it's important to acknowledge that the family is not the only one. In *Family Abolition - Capitalism and the Communizing of Care*, M.E. O'Brien, rightfully points out that what we would summarise as existential needs, is today answered through three primary organizing institutions: "commodity exchange in the capitalist market, state-provided services, and personal relationships of dependency that typically take the form of the family."¹¹ So it makes a lot of sense to engage with the others as well.

The role of the market is evident, sufficient financial resources dramatically reduce many of the risks and vulnerabilities one can face. This goes for every period of life, but I think we can see it in the clearest and most brutal form when people get older and their needs exponentially grow. Then your access to adequate housing, supplemental care, hired assistance, good food etc., determines your situation drastically. Accordingly, the corresponding outlook already determines how relaxed or anxious we can look forward to this time. The difference this makes can clearly be seen by looking at the different levels of ease we have in regard to the existential needs that will accompany our mothers aging. It seems obvious that commodity exchange on the capitalist market can and will not lead to a more existentially secured life for all. While it does provide those with sufficient financial resources with opportunities, those without them including a large number of those offering them on the market will be excluded.

But we've had quite a few discussions with others in which we had to justify putting so much emphasis on the transformation of relationships, rather than putting the state and larger society in the center of our practice. Do you remember?

Lua: There's one moment in particular that I actually remember vividly. It was a couple of years ago in a class where we were asked to present our work and practice. We shared a map we had made around the topic of existential care. It was clear that we were interested in looking at our relationships as sites for transformation. As I recall, the professor's response came quite quick and sounded something like this: "Thanks for sharing, but what about the big picture?" What this was implying was: You're looking at this from the wrong direction and you're getting lost in the "private" You're missing the big issues where change is really needed.

But it was precisely our engagement with these broader issues that compelled us to translate both our theoretical commitments and political aspirations into lived practice. It's a practice that is grounded in the relational, the embodied, the affective and the everyday. Of course they are shaped by broader structures of power, but in turn, they also shape those very structures.

¹¹M.E. O'Brien, *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care* (Pluto Press., 2023), 190.

For me it's never been about committing myself to a binary either/or. Rather, it's about acknowledging the inescapable necessity of practice itself. I'm convinced that without transformation at the level of interpersonal relationships, networks, collectives, and households, broader systemic change cannot be meaningfully initiated, let alone sustained.

Kim: I remember these conversations and above all, I remember how misunderstood I felt afterwards. Of course, there is ambivalence, that comes with complexity, and I think it's crucial to welcome it into both one's position and practice. But it felt as if we were being accused of being naive. In a way, that was reducing the multi-layered and faceted notions of transformation, of justice-making, and quite frankly also of living a good life, to something very absolute and flat. And it made me really wonder: how come I can see the much needed large scale transformation so clearly entangled with the relational scale which I dedicate my practice to, but some others can't recognise their entanglement vice versa? This has felt quite intimidating at times, I'm glad it does so much less today.

Lua: I believe O'Brien's three-part division offers a useful starting point for highlighting the interconnectedness of these institutions in terms of their influence within society, and for illustrating how each sphere currently generates its own problematic or exclusionary dynamics.

I agree with what you said about the market, without radical redistribution, it extends the lifespan of those who have the means with little regard to, or even at the expense of, the marginalised.

The role of the state as an existential caretaker in welfare states like Germany or Austria is evident in its provision of essential services such as healthcare, childcare, and various social benefits. In this capacity, the state acts both as a direct provider, managing certain sectors, and as a regulator, shaping others through legislation and policy.

In regard to social services, I was born in the 90s and even though the neoliberal erosion of the welfare state had already begun, I still benefited massively from it throughout my whole education. The state paid for most of my school trips, be it to the lakes in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, to Scotland with my English class, or to go skiing in Austria. It financed a big part of my 8 years of studies, always on maximum BAföG¹² rate (from around 680€ a month when I started to 861€ last September when I got the last transfer). For some years it felt like I was in a better financial position than some of my middle-class friends whose parents were barely supporting them financially. It's a tough time for middle-class kids with stingy parents. For me, on the other hand, it was perhaps one of my most financially secure times thus far. I wouldn't describe what I feel as gratitude, but I definitely have a feeling of humbleness towards the access, privileges, and the opportunities it created.

But of course, systems created by the state are and have always been ambivalent at best, harmful at worst. In addition to general holistic questions, they have always exploited the work

¹²BAföG stands for Bundesausbildungsförderungsgesetz, and is Germany's Federal Training Assistance Act for students who attend secondary schools and universities. The amount is calculated based on the parents' income. In 2024, 11,5% of all students received financial support under the 'BAföG'- Act. "BAföG Statistik 2024", bafög-rechner.de.

of migrant communities and at the same time created a great level of exclusivity, e.g. making citizenship and legal status determining access factors, and leaving people in great need without care.

But even for those with access to it, we're witnessing a diminishing of the protective effect of the welfare state particularly in relation to rising living costs and the basic conditions for survival. What the state provides in terms of support and protection is increasingly insufficient to sustain people's livelihoods, be it minimum wage, or the pensions that have not kept pace with the rising inflation and become more and more insufficient in proportion to economic developments, or the regulation of urgent areas such as the housing market.

Instead, there is a significant rise in income inequality,¹³ in-work-poverty,¹⁴ as well as old age poverty. We're dealing with an immense increase in housing costs - from 2010 to 2022, "asking rents [in Germany] increased by 50% nationally and up to 70% in large cities."¹⁵ And between 2020 and 2024, living costs in Berlin have increased by approximately 20%.¹⁶

Now, I'm jumping to the next scale, but this development also coincides with the EU's far-reaching armament programme costing billions.¹⁷ In this context and against the backdrop of stagnating economic growth and shrinking state resources, austerity measures are increasingly targeting the cultural and social sectors, while further cuts appear not only likely, but politically accepted. This is not an abstract feeling anymore, as an increasing number of our friends, due to layoffs or the current hopelessness of funding in the cultural sector, are in the process of retraining, or newly registered at the Jobcenter.

Kim: Another layer to anticipate (although often collectively suppressed) is, the costs that the climate collapse will have, even for places like Germany in the coming years.¹⁸ By costs I'm not referring to investments in far reaching, socially just transformations that would put the protection and needs of people and ecosystems in the center, nor the paying of reparation to those who have disproportionately contributed but are over proportionately affected by it. I think this is so important to show, even if I guess you know all of that, but it's not that we are dealing with one diagram going into the wrong direction, we have several different ones that steer against each other and create a situation in which demands for greater social justice are increasingly difficult to realise, paving the way for all facets of austerity politics and exclusion.

Lua: The outlined developments are alarming and reveal to somewhat marginalized communities have known for a long time, that in addition to fighting against the dismantling of the welfare

¹³Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, *Soziale Ungleichheit in Deutschland*, 2024.

¹⁴Despite employment, a significant number of individuals in Germany remain at risk of poverty. In 2019, approximately 3.1 million employed individuals (8% of the workforce) were living on less than 60% of the median income, a threshold commonly used to define poverty. Federal Statistical Office of Germany, 2021.

¹⁵Wall Street Observer, 2024.

¹⁶Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, 2025.

¹⁷"ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030" – All in all an investment of 800.000.000.000€.
European Parliament, 2025.

¹⁸Report on the costs of climate change in Germany. "The study concludes that the expected annual costs for the period from 2022 to 2050 will rise steadily over time, ultimately totaling between €280 billion and €900 billion." Deutscher Bundestag, 2024.

state, we need to create alternative networks of trust and existential care in order to navigate our lives long-term.

Kim: I would like to add one diagram, though, that's also steering, I don't want to call it "in the wrong direction," but in one that calls into question the structuring logics of both the welfare state that's relying on the intergenerational contract and the family as such – the demographic change. The aging population that results from a low fertility rate combined with a high life expectancy in places like Germany or Austria is so drastic, the only thing preventing actual shrinkage is migration.¹⁹

In the context of the state, this means that fewer young people are contributing to pension and healthcare systems, while more older people are relying on them. This growing imbalance threatens the stability of these systems. Alongside a rise in old-age poverty, it has also pushed health and elder care into a profound crisis, the latter being a particularly neglected field. Silvia Federici describes it as one that "suffers from a double cultural and social devaluation:"²⁰ not only is it shaped by the broader devaluation of reproductive labor, but it is also impacted by the fact that older people are not seen as productive, and therefore not seen as valuable within capitalist societies.

So, I think this is another very relevant layer that can be added to the difficulties that you described above, that makes the state as a provider of care, under its current logics, increasingly unreliable and the general situation for people who need it more precarious.

But let's look at the relationships of dependency that typically take the form of the family. To be precise, let's talk about the family as the hegemonic form these relationships take, because this is the other site where we encounter the consequences of this development. Although pressure on it is rising, it is increasingly incapable of compensating the deficits produced by the state.

I'm aware that our critique of the family extends far beyond its increasing inability to sustain itself, and I believe we would feel just as compelled to interrogate it critically even if it were thriving. That said, the reality is that the family is undeniably getting weaker as a social structure, which has a big impact on people's lives. As a result, a growing portion of the population is already living without relatives or looking toward a future with few, if any, familial ties.

So for those who have the financial privilege, the market can fulfill many of their existential needs, though surely not all. Those without these financial resources are not only confronted with the difficulties of the state's support and care not being sufficient, but on top with another essential one of the three institutions, the family, not being available to them. For this group of people, the "[...] need for safety and closeness can no longer be satisfied by traditional family living arrangements."²¹

This general shift we see in larger society is clearly visible, in small, in the household I grew up

¹⁹Pressemitteilung Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025.

²⁰Silvia Federici. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (PM Press, 2012), 290.

²¹Janosch Schobin et al., *Freundschaft heute: Eine Einführung in die Freundschaftssoziologie* (Transcript Verlag, 2016), 143.

in, where everyone who is alive is now over 70. The same is true for almost every other member of my family I know and feel close to. I remember that, even as a child, I experienced a kind of anticipatory grief toward the inevitable dissolving of this structure over time.

So when I look at my family today, I can see that those who built a reliable care structure around me as I was growing up, when I needed extra nurturing, protection, and care, will have a much smaller structure to rely on themselves when they in turn become dependent on extra care again.

I also want to share something I'm noticing as I write not just about family but about my family. It is this fear of the gaps I'm leaving. I think it is the act of writing itself. Speaking allows for softness and fragments. In speech, incompleteness is expected. Writing, however, suggests coherence and finality. In that sense, it can feel brutal.

Because for me, growing up mixed, family has meant very different things. It has been the name for a system that unfolded its functions daily, sustained by women from two generations, who have continuously been with me and still are today, and to whom I am grateful.

But it has also been the name for some who are geographically distant. A connection that, in some ways, has had little impact on my everyday life and, at the same time, is embedded in my body and identity in ways that inform my entire reality.

I don't want to fail to name them:

There is my father, Baba, who throughout my life was both extremely close and far away. He died in 2009, and my feelings toward him are many, but the strongest is love.

My grandmother Oumou, whose name I carry and who cries as easily as I.

And my beautiful brother Inuwa, who's birth, although not in my household, sparked so much joy in me.

And the many others who have claimed me as family, for which, even as I wish to critically examine and destabilise the concept of family, I remain grateful for.

I'm sharing this, because I feel like the most radical conversations around the family must hold so much complexity.

Lua: I feel you. I understand what you're saying as that there might be a trap of (emotionally) simplifying too much when critically examining this concept.

Simplifications make the path more straightforward perhaps, but actually they don't do our experiences justice. We don't want to strip this multi-layered construct of all its complexity and our own personal experiences of caring, meaningful relationships.

Kim: You are right, I see this as a kind of balancing act of acknowledging our lived realities and the meaningfulness of lineage, and yet, in order for us to be able to take on such a charged construct, we need to take a step back and examine it closely. Because it might seem like the

family has been this natural social unit forever, but actually, it has undergone quite a specific historical and politically charged development. Far from being a universal or neutral institution, the family was shaped by changing economic systems and ideological needs, its current form being the product of these power relations.

If for instance we look back to ancient Rome, the Latin word *familia* still carried a very different meaning, and referred not to a group united by affection or blood, but to everything a free male citizen possessed, including slaves, land, and children.²² It signified ownership and control and not the intimate relationship many associate the term with now.

It was up until the early modern period in pre-capitalist feudal societies that the concept of the family was far broader than today's nuclear ideal. The defining social unit at that time was often the “whole house” – a household community that included not only blood relatives, but also servants, apprentices, tenants, and unrelated dependents. Here, relationships were governed not so much by kinship but by position within the household economy. It was a unit of production and reproduction: care work, agricultural labour, and craftwork occurred side by side, without rigid divisions between domestic and economic spheres.²³

The transition to capitalism disrupted this arrangement profoundly. As capitalist production demanded more specialized and centralized forms of labour, the once-unified sphere of the household was split into market (production) and home (reproduction). Men were increasingly defined as wage labourers in the public economy, while women²⁴ were pushed into unpaid reproductive roles in the private household. This division was engineered to meet the needs of industrial capitalism and the state, including the need for a stable labour force through gendered division of labour (unpaid reproductive labor) and the general privatization of care.²⁵

During the 18th and 19th centuries, amid industrialization, the bourgeois nuclear family crystallized more clearly: a man as the breadwinner,²⁶ a woman as the housewife, their children as dependents, and marriage as the moral and legal anchor. The family was framed as a private and apolitical space, although it reinforced heteronormativity and gender hierarchies, as well as contributing to a certain form of individualism. It became the idealized site of emotional life, but also of social discipline – a space no longer communal but privatized, policed, and reproductive of capitalist norms.²⁷

The nuclear family ideal was for many decades largely limited to the bourgeoisie, as working-class families relied on women's and children's labor. Its promotion excluded many, and was used to enforce social hierarchies and norms of respectability.

²²Gisela Notz. *Kritik des Familiarismus: Theorie und soziale Realität eines ideologischen Gemäldes* (Schmetterling Verlag, 2015), 14.

²³*Ibid.*, 14 & 34–36.

²⁴Throughout this text, we use categories such as *women* and *men* in the context of historically gendered divisions of labor, particularly around care and reproduction. We do so with an awareness that these binary categories are socially constructed and that they have failed and continue to fail to do justice to the complexities of people's lives, identities, and experiences. We italicize these terms to signal that they are not fixed or natural identities, but political and relational positions: ones that may be claimed, imposed, or refused.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 14 & 38–40.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 15.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 42–45.

Its creation was not incidental, nor is it incidental that it remains today. In contrast, it is to this day foundational to capitalist production, because it sustains and regenerates the labour force without incurring costs for capital. By offloading the work of social reproduction (childcare, eldercare, emotional support, domestic labor) onto the private sphere, capitalism externalizes these fundamental functions while continuing to depend on them for its ongoing profitability. At the same time, it continues to produce class structures, gender relations to enforce patriarchal norms, and excludes or pathologizes alternative forms of kinship and care.

Today, the family is a much less rigid construct, in the shape it takes, how power is distributed within and also in its temporality and absoluteness. Also, the outsourcing of care work in European and settler-colonial societies to migrant women from the Global South, the commodification of care under neoliberal capitalism, the expansion of low-paid and precarious care work, and the crisis of social reproduction have and are shaping today's families and the realities attached to them significantly.

To understand the family and its position in society and our personal lives as well as the shifts and changes it has undergone over the last 300 years, we must see it not as a private refuge, but as a deeply political and economic construct.

What also prevails besides its material meanings and implications, is the immense political weight, and social and emotional meaning it holds, which can not be separated from, nor understood without the powerful role of familism, the ideology which makes the bourgeois nuclear family the model and norm for the social structure of state and society. On this note, it's also relevant to highlight the legal protection of the family. In Germany the first paragraph of the 6th article of the constitution is dedicated to it: "Marriage and family are under the special protection of the state order."²⁸

And this is so important to stress, because although being such a politically charged concept, it has undergone a long and effective process of naturalization which produced the collective image of the nuclear family "(...) as the only form of cohabitation that satisfies seemingly inescapable human needs for security and affection."²⁹

I think most people who do not reproduce the family, whether by choice or not, have been confronted with people's expectations, pity, or incomprehension. This isn't something I encounter much anymore as I move predominantly through queer spaces. Perhaps that's why it strikes me as almost strange when I do encounter it and get reminded that there is this deep rooted belief that whatever one lives beyond, aside or before the family has less meaning or that it is simply a stopover before eventually coming around after all.

And it's true to many people, the family serves as an emotional refuge, a place of safety, protection, and ultimately care. Sophie Lewis goes as far as to say that „[family] is, at root, the name we use for the fact that care is privatized in our society."³⁰ So as demonstrated this affective association doesn't come out of nowhere, but is actually the result of the complex interplay of capitalist production and the oppression of women.

²⁸Federal Republic of Germany, *Article 6 para. 1 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (Deutscher Bundestag, 1949)*.

²⁹Gisela Notz, *Kritik des Familiarismus*, 16.

³⁰Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation (Verso, 2022)*, 15.

Therefore I would say that an anti-capitalist and feminist positioning has somehow also incorporated a critical position on the family.

Lua: I agree, and I think it's baffling how much this sense of properness and legitimacy is still associated with the family. It's interesting that you said incomprehension; that's something that resonates with me, because it shows again that our sense of self and identity is not only formed and sustained internally, but also how we are seen and recognized. My experience is that it can feel very isolating to be misunderstood.

And sure, some view or wish to view the family as an emotional refuge. Some live that reality daily. But for many others, it's simply not the case. This is far more common than the romanticisation of the family suggests. It remains the core sites for abuse, be it physical, sexual, or emotional, as well as femicidal.³¹ And even apart from these extremes, very often, the family is a site of heavy contradiction, stress, and even trauma for those who won't or can't embody the values the family seeks to reproduce. This goes for many queer people,³² for example. And yet, it remains apolitical in the collective eye.

But there is another point I would like to add concerning the apoliticality and neutrality of the family; these attributes are awarded very selectively along factors such as class and race. The family turns into an explicitly political site in public discourse, when poor and / or racialised families are being considered a threat and scrutinised. We see that when racialised and poor families are marked as sites of violence, when childbearing is accused of exploiting the welfare state, marriage accused of being for the papers, or family reunification of people with subsidiary protection status considered as dispensable, while no one calls out the political dimension of wealth accumulation and the exploitation of tax advantages by so-called family businesses.

A stark illustration of this, dare I say, fascist double-standard is the push by governments in European and settler-colonial societies to incentivize higher birth rates in response to demographic decline,³³ while simultaneously suspending family reunification and sending non-white children to refugee camps and deporting them. This is such a blunt demonstration of white supremacy.

It is also the very same familiarist structure of society that is creating and deepening class relations. The access to family resources and future inheritances shapes our class positions profoundly, and much more than the narratives around social mobility attempt to persuade us to believe otherwise.

The transmission and accumulation of wealth through family ties is one of the core functions and a defining feature of the family. While families also play a crucial role in socialization, shaping educational opportunities, and passing on knowledge and networks, the economic dimension stands out clearly. Even without exploring the deeper cultural and social

³¹“*Sexualisierte Gewalt: Weit verbreitet, kaum geahndet.*” Deutschlandfunk, 2025.

³²“*Half of LGBT+ young adults in UK are estranged from a relative, survey finds.*” The Guardian, 2023.

³³Examples range from the Trump administration's proposed “baby bonus” to efforts by European states like Greece, currently investing billions in cash benefits and tax incentives to boost birth rates. “Greece to Spend 20 bln Euros on Lifting Low Birth Rate,” *Reuters*, 2024. & Demissie and Faulders, “*Trump Administration Looking at \$5,000 ‘Baby Bonus’ to Incentivize Public to Have More Children.*” ABC News, 2025.

mechanisms of class reproduction, it is unmistakable: our family background profoundly shapes our material conditions.

This is clearly reflected in the statistics and data around the accumulation and transfer of assets, with Germany standing out as a particularly stark example. Every year, around €400 billion are passed on through inheritances and gifts. These transfers already make up more than half of all private assets, and this share is expected to continue rising.³⁴ On average, individuals receive €85,000 in inheritances and €89,000 in gifts, yet half of all transfers go to just 10% of the population, while the remaining 90% share the other half.³⁵

In contrast, the bottom 40% of the population own almost no assets and are unlikely to inherit anything of significance.³⁶ There are also strong historical (East / West) and gender disparities: in Eastern Germany,³⁷ inheritances average €52,000, compared to €92,000 in the West. Women receive 37% fewer gifts and also 13% fewer inheritances compared to men. In addition, the values received by women are also, on average, 7% lower.³⁸ In short, the gender-specific power relations of the family are clearly reflected in who receives wealth and how much, while also the historically grown economic power relations between the East and the West are perpetuated.

In West Germany and Austria, studies show that the top-earning 20% are twice as likely to receive inheritances or gifts compared to the bottom 20%. The deep-rooted patterns of intergenerational class reproduction become visible here again: income, education, and status remain closely tied to one's family background. As a result, wealth is preserved within families and reproduced across generations, reinforcing the existing class positions.

Of course, what I'm bringing up here as critique of the family is nothing new; quite the contrary. There is long history of family abolitionist movements, early communism being one of them. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels already started arguing in 1845 that the family is the central unit of capitalist reproduction through creating isolated household economies based on private property, while securing male lineage and capital accumulation. In their writing, it was stated clearly that “abolition of individual economy is inseparable from the abolition of the family”³⁹ and included the “abolition of all right of inheritance” in their 10-point programme in the communist manifesto.⁴⁰ So yes, I believe from an orthodox Marxist standpoint anti-capitalism would always also mean the abolition of the family and all right of inheritance.⁴¹ However, how the family in the Russian revolution and in the real existing forms of socialism developed and played out is a really different story to tell.⁴²

Kim: And almost 200 years later there is this new wave of family abolitionists, this time mainly

³⁴DIW [German Institute for Economic Research], 2017.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 2021.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 2017.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 2021.

³⁸Bona Hyun, “*Wie Frauen bei Erbschaften und Schenkungen benachteiligt werden*,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2023.

³⁹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1845–46.

⁴⁰Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848.

⁴¹Sophie Lewis. *Abolish the Family*, 46.

⁴²Bini Adamczak. *Beziehungswise Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017).

queer communists and left theorists like Julianne Gleeson, K.D. Griffiths, Sophie Lewis, and M.E. O'Brien, who again make us imagine a world without the family. Their recent writings have been key to both our understanding and relationships to the family, and have influenced a lot where we stand. Lots of what we bring up against the nuclear family can be either attributed to them or has been broadly inspired by their writings.

They look at the family as a violent social structure, that often actively and always passively exercises control on its members and upholds systems of domination and inequality in broader society by accumulating private property and power at the expense of others well-being.⁴³ O'Brien, who I think both of us felt particularly drawn to, writes: "To be a basis of human freedom and collective emancipation, family abolition must concurrently be the overcoming of capitalist society, including the state and wage labor."⁴⁴ I highlight this quote because it touches on an important point that has caused much discussion between you and me. Namely, the question of whether overcoming capitalism is a condition for the abolition of the family or a movement that takes place simultaneously. In other words: can family abolition take place under the current conditions?

I write this also because O'Brien, along with other abolitionists, does acknowledge alternative formations, such as queer kinship or chosen families⁴⁵ that consciously depart from oppressive family norms and the isolating structure of the private nuclear household,⁴⁶ which I think is important to point out.

She calls them "radically alternative household forms [and] powerful expressions of yearning toward human freedom and articulations of family abolitionism in the present" and yet she quickly comes round with the limitations even these hold for her.⁴⁷ Aside from still operating within the logics of capitalism, a dynamic that puts damaging pressure on the internal relationships, she points out that "As they combine dependency and care like the family does, they are also potential spaces of personal coercion and violence"⁴⁸ and they preserve the exclusive character inherent to the family form.⁴⁹

Lua: I would come back to that, but want to just add something on a more general note, which I think is crucial to understand the vision of family abolitionist theory, because although, Sophie Lewis writes that everybody, no exceptions, will have to let something go, as this liberation process unfolds,⁵⁰ family abolition is at its base a call for a massive extension of care in our life and society. Thus, for Lewis, abolishing the family is the opposite of eliminating love or care; it's liberating them and creating a world where care is not bound to private property and restrictive

⁴³M.E. O'Brien. *Family Abolition*, 7.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁵What role the language of the *family* plays in naming and marking these formations is a question that often comes to mind for me by the way and one I don't think we can adequately explore here. I do feel like this question is a contradictory terrain, as it operates somewhere between healing appropriation, deconstruction and reproduction.

⁴⁶These formations are rooted in diverse traditions of political liberation, including feminism, gay and trans radicalism, Black liberation, and anarchism; M.E. O'Brien. *Family Abolition*, 173-174.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 175.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 177.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 178.

⁵⁰Sophie Lewis. *Abolish the Family*, 10.

familial structures anymore.⁵¹

And regarding your question whether overcoming capitalism is a condition for the abolition of the family, I want to point out one striking feature of many family abolitionist books, which is somewhat symbolic for the difficulty of answering this question: the bulk of the texts, often three-quarters or more, are devoted to diagnosing why the family must be abolished. These sections operate on a meta level, unpacking the family's role in capitalism, patriarchy, and social reproduction, which is often very rich and enlightening. But only in the final chapter does the focus typically shift to imagining alternatives, and even then, the visions tend to remain abstract, sketching broad principles for a communist society rather than concrete processes of transformation.

Nevertheless, they do all gesture somewhere and I think it's fair to say that some family abolitionist writings can be read as advocating for an expansion of the state and its role in managing care.⁵² In these visions, family abolition is achieved through, or in collaboration with, the state, making a revolution that seizes state power a necessary condition. I think there is no need to elaborate why, at the moment, this seems like a faraway, if not generally improbable scenario. Even Lewis, who remains rather abstract, acknowledges on the last page of her book, with a quiet realism, that she likely won't live to witness whatever comes next.⁵³

Kim: But even aside from its current unfeasibility, the idea of focusing on the state, hoping for it to be or become this just entity that does not function as an abusive system is a strange desire for me, as our current spiraling into the logic of fascism as well as state socialist history demonstrates.

Lua: Yes, I absolutely agree, and so does O'Brien, who is also very critical of this vision, encouraging the pursuit of a family abolition "that refuses the consolidation of authority into the hands of even a benevolent state."⁵⁴

She theorizes this critique through the understanding of the state as an "institution that rules over social life yet is separated from the direct relationships between people,"⁵⁵ making family abolition in the hands of the state a threatening top-down project. If family abolition were also meant to bring an end to class relations, the state could not be the answer for her. O'Brien makes this argument by examining current and historic examples of socialist states, which have mostly upheld rather than properly challenged the rule of capital, adding that all revolutionary nationalist efforts to repurpose the state as a tool against its racist and colonial past have consistently resulted in dead ends. Following that line of thought, she consequently argues for the abolition of the state.⁵⁶

And as to your question and our discussion if capitalism would have to be over, before existential care could be liberated and family abolition could take place, or if this can be simultaneous movement, I would say it gets a bit more tricky with M. E. O'Brien, as she drafts

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 9-42.

⁵²M.E. O'Brien. *Family Abolition*, 190.

⁵³Sophie Lewis. *Abolish the Family*, 88.

⁵⁴M.E. O'Brien. *Family Abolition*, 191.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 192.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 193.

the transition more carefully and detailed in form of a period and not the one time revolutionary event.

In *Family Abolition*, O'Brien envisions, instead of an expansion of the state, a communization of care through the establishment of a net of communes, which would rise after capitalism and the state are dismantled through revolutionary uprising and/or collapse of the same.⁵⁷ In *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052–2072*⁵⁸, this imagined shift towards communizing gets very tangible. In this book, conceptualised as a retrospective, ecological and economic crises triggered a global collapse and the daily life of people became more and more dominated by persistent disruptions and fragility. As markets ceased functioning and the state lost the ability to sustain social reproduction, communities started to organize in order to meet everyone's basic needs. What makes this vision particularly interesting is that insurrection emerges not from workplace seizures or the capture of centralized power, but from the struggle for survival within a collapsing system.

The direction of political thought this stems from, and with which she is aligned here, is called communization theory. Some of the prominent figures and groups are the Invisible Committee, Tiqqun and the Théorici Communist. Although they represent two divergent positions (simplified as an anarchist and a Marxist situationist), they are unified in parting from traditional Marxism, rejecting both the transitional stages, via state socialism to communism, as well as the dictatorship of the proletariat. Tiqqun and also closely aligned the invisible committee promote the idea of an immediate insurrection and grassroots uprising. In texts like *The Coming Insurrection* the revolution will not be made “by any existing class, [...] [but] it will be made by ‘friendships’, by ‘the formation of sensibility as a force’, ‘the deployment of an archipelago of worlds’, ‘an other side of reality’, ‘the party of insurgents’ – but most of all by that ever-present and always amorphous positivity: we.”⁵⁹

One criticism I share with others towards these texts is that they often adopt an abstract and, at times, overwrought tone, without offering a clear account of what is actually to be undone through the insurrectional dynamic they propose. The complexity of real social relations, particularly the material and interpersonal dynamics of class relations, is too often sidelined in favor of a kind of insurrectionary romanticism.

What is often present in many insurrectionary texts, such as those by The Invisible Committee, is an undefined 'we' positioned in opposition to a 'they' – serving as a faceless enemy that must be fought. This framing sets the stage for shifting the responsibility for capitalist class relations entirely onto the abstract others. However, what is overlooked is that we have, of course, internalized these relations, and currently find ourselves with no position outside of them. What is crucially missing, for me, is the recognition that it is also we who must cease reproducing these forms of relationality.

So what communization theory lacks – which I also see reflected in O'Brien's writing somehow – is to value and reflect the necessity of particular, immediate practices in the here and now,

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 219-233.

⁵⁸M. E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi. *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052-2072* (Common Notions, 2022).

⁵⁹Endnotes, *What are we to do?*, 2012.

“communization is thus not a form of prefigurative revolutionary practice⁶⁰ of the sort that diverse anarchisms aspire to be, since it does not have any positive existence prior to a revolutionary situation.”⁶¹

Kim: This end of capitalism feels much more in tune with how I experience the world and with what I am able to imagine. A collapse of systems and the emergence of new systems. And communes as a type of possible decentralised system. As you can see, it's the idea of anything centralised and just that will follow the current system that I simply don't see at all.

However, I believe that placing all emphasis on radically different systems risks sidelining the social dimension of collective transformation. What often gets overlooked is the challenging, ongoing work of learning and unlearning the logic deeply embedded in the current system. This is the everyday labor of change, and it cannot be skipped.

Yet there is a huge practical and theoretical gap when it comes to the question of how do we get there collectively. I don't mean the collapse, but the forming of liberated communes. Where will we learn and unlearn? And transform the way we relate to each other? Where is the function and value of our current attempts?

Lua: Yes, true, and that's what I found so strange about the communization theory and O'Brien's arguments here more concretely.

Just to be clear, I totally agree with her when she writes that existing communes, house projects and similar endeavours are facing severe limitations as they can't escape the capitalist conditions.⁶² I just have to think back to our time in the collective in Brandenburg,⁶³ and several fitting examples come to mind. One that stands out is how contradictory it felt that we were happy to redistribute tasks when one of us went on vacation for two weeks, but when someone took a paid job outside for the same amount of time, taking on their share of the work often no longer felt good or fair.

Kim: It's interesting. When things like this don't work out or bring up difficult feelings, we often interpret it as a failure of our solidarity. But maybe the issue was that we needed to apply a logic that went a step further, in order for it to feel truly transformative. For example, it would have been more consistent not only to share the money we earned together as a group, but also to collectively manage and access the income some members earned outside the collective, especially since others took on additional care and reproductive work in their absence. But even that wouldn't have resolved the inconsistency entirely, because some

⁶⁰Prefigurative practices are shaped by the view that the forms of social life we aspire to must be enacted in the present, not postponed to a distant future. It challenges the separation between means and ends by insisting that the ways we organize, relate, and create today are themselves the seeds of transformative possibility. It draws from anarchism, feminist theory, and other emancipatory movements that prioritize horizontalism, mutual aid, and direct action.

⁶¹Endnotes, *What are we to do?*, 2012.

⁶²M.E. O'Brien. *Family Abolition*, 209.

⁶³The two of us lived and worked in a collective in Brandenburg for 3 years between 2018 and 2021. Constantly questioning and figuring out how we wanted to work and organize our lives together was, far from perfect, but very important and formative. That is why we often come back to it.

collective members could expect to receive an inheritance, while others could not. In some respects, trying to do things differently requires a really high level of consistency in order for us to truly feel into it.

Lua: I think it mainly reflects the limits of our willingness at the time to collectivize our financial lives beyond the shared economy within the collective. Still, it might actually be a good illustration of how much space there often is between the actual structural limits and the way we practice things in reality.

But coming back to O'Brien, she sees more or less only protest camps and insurrections as a properly meaningful alternative to a more communist form of social reproduction, as they often do not pretend to really reproduce themselves outside of capitalism, instead they rely on theft or the gift economy of donations and support from outside.

What distinguishes group houses, communes, and alternative living arrangements from protest camps and insurgent social reproduction for her is that they are “legal arrangements within a market society, [...] [which] require the stability of property ownership and income flows similar to private families.”⁶⁴ Pushed into a shared state of poverty, relying on economic self-sufficiency and isolation or depending heavily on substantial contributions from wage labor or inherited wealth. In that sense there is only a slight difference between group houses and private households for her, depending on the cash flow from outside and the “tangle of dependency and care that holds people together.”⁶⁵ Although they may be less oppressive than traditional nuclear families, they still face the same pressures from capitalist labour markets and the state, leading to many of the same internal contradictions.

But this notion of transformations causes irritation for me, a good example of that is the examples she presents in the following quote: “The pressure of state policies, poverty, class differences among residents, or lack of mental healthcare inevitably exacerbate interpersonal conflict and often lead to the collapse of such deliberate communities.”⁶⁶ To be precise: it's not that I disagree with this and that these problems are not constantly becoming visible, but what I find quite incomprehensible here is why would post-capitalist communities differ so fundamentally from this?

Sure, the pressure of state policies would be gone if the state collapsed, but wouldn't there be other new threats emerging, putting pressure on people individually and collectively? And is it not likely that most communes would also face a (long) time of poverty until new economies were effectively put in place? The collapse of capitalism will also not end the lack of mental healthcare, nor make the constant appearance of interpersonal conflict disappear, how, if not through developing a group culture which actively addresses these topics, and how, if not through collective learning and unlearning about conflicts, will we be able to deal with them?

Of all the things listed, it's class differences that baffle me the most. How would they evaporate from one day to the next? I deeply share D. Hunter's opinion here and don't believe that:

⁶⁴M.E. O'Brien. *Family Abolition*, 2023, 209.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 209.

⁶⁶M.E. O'Brien. *Family Abolition*, 2023, 209.

“we'll all step into a cleansing shower of post-capitalism and never be the same again. I believe that this system has become our culture. It has shaped our souls, and it will continue to survive as long as we refuse to challenge the ways in which we embody and practice it, as long as we allow our social relationships to be framed through a capitalist lens.”⁶⁷

There is a lot of work to be done to reflect and undo our internalized class positionalities and to develop the abilities to really share resources with each other as well as the securities attached to them. We will be heavily challenged in any attempts of collective liberation and commune building if we are not “unpicking the ways in which we are psychologically entwined with the current economic system” and figure out how we can survive also the capitalist present collectively.⁶⁸

There's something unsettling to me about the belief that, once capitalism collapses, most of the challenges we already face in building a more just and communal world would somehow melt away without real struggle or disappear with ease. That kind of thinking feels utopian, not in a hopeful sense, but in a way that overlooks the real complexity of transformation. It seems to suggest a vision of communism capable of overcoming almost all constraints and inconveniences of our lives, an idea that always makes me pause. It reminds me of capitalism whispering, “Technology is going to solve everything,” or certain forms of communism and socialism propagating, in different words, the very same thing. Freeing ourselves from all constraints might sound catchy and like a promising vision, but I find it more helpful and more honest to understand liberation, and therefore also freedom, in a way Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery put it, “not [as] the absence of constraint or a do- what-you-like individualism but [as] an emergent capacity to work on relationships, shift desires, and undo ingrained habits.”⁶⁹

What also brings me to something which has been on my mind for quite some time now, and that is the way dependencies are often conceptualized, seen and thought of, and entirely problematised. I share a different conception of dependencies, one that is not inherently negative, as I would say that being dependent on others and each other is in some way a very basic feature of human life and existence, nothing we need to overcome. Dependencies may limit us, but they also enable agency within a frame. They situate us in the world and our surroundings. Independence, on the other hand, if absolute and not in relation to anything, becomes a state of irrelevance, doesn't it?

It seems that what the paradigm of independence actually implies is becoming entirely dependent on money and nothing else, excluding all other forms of relational or material interdependence. This echoes a point Bini makes in *Beziehungswise Revolution*, where she writes that money, as the general equivalent, has replaced our conscious awareness of what we actually depend on. I find that observation to be deeply accurate.

And I think many people prefer the term interdependence, and that's understandable, it captures the reality that we are relational beings, embedded in networks of mutual connection. But it also runs the risk of obscuring the fact that the extent to which we are dependent is not always balanced. That's why I find it more useful right now to speak of dependency. I feel it

⁶⁷D. Hunter. *Chav Solidarity*, 278.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 283.

⁶⁹Carla Bergmann & Nick Montgomery. *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* (AK Press, 2017).

draws our attention to the possibility of unevenness, to vulnerability, and to the politics embedded in relational structures. Sometimes, the language we chose unintentionally softens or obscures the material realities and power relations surrounding our needs. In other words, I wonder if this reveals a kind of denial. After all, it can be unsettling to be or become more dependent than others, and to generally feel life's constraints.

Being critical of the entanglement of care and dependency is, of course, valid and important, since these relations are very vulnerable to abuse and have too often been sites of violence. That's why I believe it's so crucial to strengthen, nurture and uphold each other's autonomy so that we can freely choose our dependencies, and commit to each other with clear intentions and consent.

It feels important to me to point that out and make myself clear here, because when we talk about wanting more existential care in our close relationships, we also consciously move away from the line of thoughts O'Brien is drawing, condemning the combination of relationships of dependency and care.

But I just can't escape this inner unease anymore, when I see glimpses of postponing almost all ambitions to solve our challenges of how we relate to one another to a post-capitalist future. I'm yearning for more accountability and more concrete visions for collective transformation to play out in practice in the here and now.

And finally I'm also wondering: If states and the current system of capital power would collapse, what would emerge out of what society is right now? Would it not be many different versions of society? And a messy, messy situation?

Kim: I think all of this is precisely why we have started using the term blurring to give language to something we were practicing and experiencing that didn't quite fit into the frameworks we had.

What we conceptualised as blurring has been very present in the conversation, woven into many of the stories and thoughts we've worked our way through.

I agree with what you said about messiness and would suggest that blurring is definitely a messy approach, as it destabilises the normative frameworks that organise relational roles, questions, and shifts how we impose ourselves on one another, what we dare to expect from each other, and how much accountability and, ultimately, mutual dependency we allow and embrace. It's not about softening interpersonal boundaries, but about blurring the structural lines that uphold relational containment. It aims to make these lines more porous and negotiable, creating space for new forms of relationality that resist, at least to some extent, the transactional logic of capitalist and normative social systems.

It can manifest as a glimpse, a way of sharing and exchanging, as well as something very concrete and committed. It's an experimentation with the fruits of the present.

This also means that blurring does not need any specific conditions to manifest itself. This however does not make it random or dislocated, what we are conceptualising here is deeply rooted in an anarchist and anti-capitalist understanding of our "[...] relationships as a front line,

a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other [...].⁷⁰

It just means that it does not need a specific starting point to come into existence.

You see, for me any effort to rewire our care relations in the present always serves three purposes, especially when the future feels so uncertain.

1. as a way to improve our lives in the present.
2. as preparation for more difficult times, when we might need to rely on them and our ability to live and sustain them,
3. as groundwork for better times, so that when they arrive, these care relations can support us in resisting the pull of old patterns.

Blurring is an absolute imperfect practice, imperfect insofar as it happens under conditions that aren't ideal without necessarily solving them. It might interfere with them, find \cracks\⁷¹ in them, but this only works without the desire for perfection. It's a practice that constantly grinds against limits or even crashes into them as it tries to bypass, undermine, and broaden systems of accountability in the present. And I think this is where blurring, as well as other approaches with a similar dedication to the now, have such a different notion than family abolition, although they don't contradict each other.

Even in its most fleeting expressions, blurring functions as a form of relational speculation. It asks: What if this relationship could hold more than we were taught it could?

On a more general note, though, I believe it's important to ask questions like 'How can this or that theory serve me?' And to engage with the different frameworks accordingly. This little question can make the encounter with radical proposals significantly more fruitful, but in my experience, it has so often not been asked or answered, especially in academic contexts. There are, of course, many possible answers to such a question, and all are valid. However, the question I'm pointing to here lies in whether a theory offers you something to confront current struggles, or if its function lies more in the expansion of one's horizon. Of course, that is not mutually exclusive; that would be simplistic. Nevertheless, these notions do carry different qualities. Family abolition, for example, serves the latter function for me in powerful ways, for which I'm deeply grateful. It exposes the limits of reformist solutions and feel-good fixes by gesturing far beyond them, something I find incredibly valuable and expansive. At the same time, I find myself wondering what it means to continually situate transformation in a "not-yet" future. Where does that leave us in the present?

Lua: I think blurring also poses interesting questions about radicality, something that I used to

⁷⁰adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (AK Press, 2017), 35.

⁷¹Bayo Akomolafe's concept of \cracks\ invites us to rethink our responses to crisis, rupture and transformation.

\Cracks\, unlike doors or windows which are anticipated, appear when the building itself begins to split. They offer opportunities to investigate failure, imagination, to play in the spaces where we don't quite measure up, and to stay with grief. In response to the unfolding miseries of our time, he encourages us to step away from solutionism and instead "share the bounty of not figuring out what to do next." Even if he sometimes slips away from me philosophically, I remain deeply moved by his thoughts.

Bayo Akomolafe, *Looking For The Cracks with Dr Bayo Akomolafe* (Video on Youtube, 2024), min 19:49. & Bayo Akomolafe. *On doors and cracks*, 2024.

think of as exclusively uncompromising and now have a much broader understanding of. This shift has largely come through learning from practices of mutual aid and forms of community organizing that are rooted in anarchist, queer-feminist and anti-capitalist traditions. Blurring as a relational stance has a different perspective in terms of where it is looking and what questions it poses, but it joins them down the river.

I agree, there are different levels on which teachings unfold, and maybe you are right, one step would be to acknowledge them more consciously, because I worry that they are being confused sometimes. There is, of course, a sad truth to the limitations we encounter as we practice existential care and mutual aid in the present, yet few dynamics are more frustrating than the tendency to displace all radical aspirations onto a speculative future event, rather than engaging with the possibilities for justice-making and exercising caring agency in the present.

This “communist-future-postponing” reminds me of those ever-present Adorno posters hanging in the kitchen of my and many other shared flats in Berlin in my early twenties. The slogan “There is no right life in the wrong one,”⁷² seemed to suggest that living a politically consistent or ethical life was impossible within a fundamentally flawed and unjust world. Which I and I think those around me translated to: Nothing is right until the revolution. This idea of the right life in a right society that resonates in many revolutionary ideas feels more and more like a political dead end to me. What if we can not and will never escape some of the contradictions and moral messiness we are confronted with now, or will discover many new ones, when capitalism collapses and we see a revolution unfold?

And I also can’t help but wonder how many of these Adorno posters now hang in the toilets of self-owned apartments in Kreuzberg or Neukölln.

Kim: I actually think they might have taken them down by now, but I completely get your point.

Let's shift our attention a bit, because although the family is really relevant for the discussion about existential care, if we neglect the norms and scripts that also inform our close relationships outside of the family, we're missing a crucial dimension.

Or in other words, I'm wondering specifically: Aren't there hegemonic norms around friendship that inform our relationships outside of the family and hinder existential care for each other, that we should tend to?

Because it was through the framework of friendship that I was taught how to build relationships with the people around me who were not part of my family. Friendship is, just like the family, considered crucial for a vital and fulfilled life, and seems to function in a sort of symbiosis with it. They often come as a pair, I have the almost rhythmic sound in my ear “Family and Friends,” “Friends and Family.”

So even today, when the way I build and nurture some of my relationships has changed a lot, and in many ways tries to resist the normative ideas tied to it, I am very aware of how deeply this ideological framework shapes the way I relate to others.

⁷²Theodor W. Adorno. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (Verso, 1951) & Martin Mittelmeier. *Es gibt kein richtiges Sich-Ausstrecken in der falschen Badewanne*.

Obviously, friendship is a very broad and fluid concept that represents less a specific type of relationship than a relationship field. The attempt here can't be to narrow it down; that would be nothing but a harmful reduction. But as a significant part of our social order, it is deeply embedded in the social structures and norms that shape society. So despite its multiformity, there is an ideological framework around it.

This might initially trigger resistance in us, because we like to think of our self-chosen relationships as liberated, I do. And of course, friendship takes on endless shapes, this initially made me overlook its potential for the discussion we're having, to be honest. Friendship seemed vague and therefore very complicated to handle analytically, I was intimidated by all the "buts" this would evoke: "But that's not how my friendships look like!" "But we do it entirely different!" I kept coming back to it, though, and I think that makes sense.

When I began reading into the genealogy of the normative friendship ideal present in European and settler-colonial societies, what stood out most was the persistent depiction of the highest form of friendship as one free from self-interest and detached from material concerns, a continuity that stretches from ancient Greece to the present. And while at first glance this might sound appealing and pure, it is no coincidence that this ideal of friendship emerged exclusively out of the desires and realities of wealthy, white and male elites, such as philosophers, soldiers, and statesmen, that have throughout time determined and romanticized a privileged form of friendship.⁷³

In no way does that mean this was the only friendship of course, countless people and relationship forms were simply excluded from the production of the hegemonic idea of friendship. This pattern of exclusion is not unique to the history of friendship, but because friendship is non-institutional, informal, and doesn't have a legal or bureaucratic framework that archives it, I feel like this makes it even more vulnerable to erasure.

Lua: It's so interesting, because the social system of the family feels so rigid and clear, this open field of friendship around it seems so undefined and through that also unmarked at first sight. This deceiving feeling of meeting on neutral ground again.

And it is reinforced by the actual multitude and diversity of connections that people call friendship or that are informed by a culture of friendship.

Kim: Culture of friendship?

Lua: I say culture of friendship in order to widen the framework. You said already that it is a field, rather than a specific type of relationship. But I can feel that for me, I tend to think about very specific relationships and instantly lose sight of the diversity of the connections affected by it. But when I try to look at it as the dominant framework of fostering and being in connection with others, it helps me to think of it as a less clearly outlined field, almost like making it a verb instead of a noun, friendly rather than friend. This of course sounds insignificant and arbitrary in our ears that love exclusivity, but I like what the adjective changes. Because it is true, it is an ideological framework that lingers over the way we foster connection with others, no matter if we call them friend, bestie, if it is a person we like a lot, we like a bit,

⁷³Grätz et al. 2003; Hermand 2006; Schinkel 2003, quoted in Janosch Schobin et al., *Freundschaft heute*, 81-93.

or we're just getting to know.

When we then look at who shaped the normative understanding of friendship and its embedded expectations, I think the question “Who does this actually serve” becomes very relevant.

Kim: Yes, this brings me to the connectedness of relational systems such as family and friendship. I think it’s interesting to view them as not only contrasting each other, but rather as complementing and reinforcing each other. Because I feel like it’s precisely through their differences, they nestle into one another. So rather than treating them as two fully coherent systems, I think we should consider how their meanings and functions are mutually shaped and how, through that, their logics align.

And even if there is an undeniable power imbalance between the systems, not least because of the legal legitimacy of one, it changes how I look at the dispersion of agency. First, in terms of questions around existential care, when we look at it as not simply “locked in” the family, but also “locked out” of friendship. Secondly, though, if I acknowledge their normative harmony I have to understand the culture of friendship as inherently entangled with the production and stabilisation of class, property, and the state as well.

Lua: It's activating to think about them as co-producing one another. So what would a culture of friendship look like that feels disruptive towards these logics? Or perhaps better, “What would a culture of friendship look like that is accountable towards its role in upholding class relations?”

Kim: I'm really curious to explore and discover that collectively! Because, in relation to the question of what gets locked out, I've had moments where I felt bluntly confronted with the supposed limits that these friendship norms imposed on my relationships.

I remember a conversation I've had in slightly different forms many times in the past, usually after mentioning that I'd sent money to friends in West Africa. Growing up mixed, with part of my family in Burkina Faso and Mali and the other in Austria, navigating stark differences in financial resources between those contexts has always been part of my life. And in that reality, sending money, sometimes small amounts, sometimes more, is normal. Some periods it's occasional, other times, the requests are more regular if specific circumstances require it. But when I spoke about it here, especially if the person receiving the money was a friend rather than a blood relative, I often received a worried look. The kind of look reserved for those considered naive. People would ask if I was cautious about not creating dependency or being taken advantage of. I could feel that, in their minds, my relationship with this person was being questioned, as if it no longer qualified as a real friendship.

The assumption seemed clear: dependency is the opposite of true friendship. You can want each other, but you must never really need each other.⁷⁴

⁷⁴Most of these conversations happened some time ago, at a time when there was some political awareness of colonial foundations and material realities among the people around me, but redistribution wasn't part of their practice. That feels different today, at least in the broader communities I'm connected to, where collective solidarity and

What's interesting is, research shows that expectations of help from friends are likely to have reached an all-time low. The higher the economic and institutional status of the respective society, the less its members believe that friendship choices should be based on considerations of utility. And I think that there is much to unwrap.⁷⁵

But above all, it confirms once more how much this hegemonic idea of friendship is tied to the logics of a society of wealth and a manifestation of privilege in the colonial matrix. But it also reveals a curious dichotomy, where anything material or existential is framed as utilitarian, and placed in contrast to the affective motives that are meant to guide our relationships. But who has the authority to interpret the meaning of utility?

Lua: That recollection is such a striking example. It's as if the presence of unequal needs somehow disqualifies the relationship, rather than revealing something about the conditions under which care must take place within it.

I think this is embedded in and fueled by the very extensive ideal of independence that is inscribed in the culture of friendship, as well as being a significant part of the overall capitalist ideology and modernity itself. This dogma of independence is evident in the neoliberal ideal that individuals are solely responsible for their own success, health, and well-being. It also appears in ableist views of worth tied to productivity, the devaluation of femmeness and traits like care and relationality, and the colonial and white supremacist frameworks that define some as dependent and inferior, and others as independent and superior.

One thing that this prevailing paradigm of individual independence does is that it leads to a culture where dependence is stigmatised and people in need of care are marginalised. I've started to think of the whole thing as a damaging fiction, actually, one that undermines collective life, weakens social bonds, and contributes to a collective withdrawal from asking for as well as providing proper collective care for each other.⁷⁶

It's no surprise, then, that under these forces, the idealised and hegemonic form of friendship has taken shape around the notion of persistent equivalence and symmetry. Within this framework, we often lack the language or social scripts to acknowledge and navigate financial and especially class differences. The dominant paradigms of equivalence, independence, and individual responsibility make it difficult to openly address inequality within our relationships. As a result, we struggle to integrate our asymmetries and talk honestly about the ways class shapes our relational lives.

Kim: There is one specific practice that comes to mind, I think it is symptomatic for this, and that's lending and borrowing money in daily life.

accountability in times of crisis has a longer history and is increasingly possible through digital networks.

⁷⁵There is a certain resistance in me to invite knowledge in that stems from the evaluation and classification of societies, often reducing the complexity to standardized indicators that reproduce colonial narratives through rankings. I do think it is telling though and decided to include it.

Janosch Schobin et al., *Freundschaft heute*, 145.

⁷⁶Reading *The Care Manifesto* in 2020 is what first sparked these thoughts.

The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (Verso, 2020).

I'm bringing this up because it's something that is really present, especially in the city where we move around and navigate space so much through money. It determines access to all kinds of relaxing, exciting, or delicious things. So people constantly lend money, in order to be able to experience something collectively or to enable someone to do something. We say, „don't worry, you can just transfer this to me at a later time“, or „just get the next drink.“ sometimes of course we say “don't worry I've got this”, but overall I feel like going through life together, but as separate economic entities is what a lot of people feel very comfortable with. I also think that being financially disciplined is considered very much a virtue, and those who can't make ends meet are often considered poor housekeepers. Needless to say, how classist, harmful, and simply wrong that is. Instead:

“The emphasis [...] should not solely be placed upon the individuals who have not saved, who have debt, who struggle to balance their books, and pay their rent. There must also be a discussion regarding why those who have saved and avoided debt are deemed to have a more socially acceptable relationship with money. They are the opposite of the same coin. They both reflect the ways in which our behaviours, values, and attitudes are shaped by a capitalist economic system.”⁷⁷

And just to be clear, I don't want to judge lending and borrowing per se, someone lending you money can be a true game changer in a dire situation. Also, only being able to do without whatever amount of money for a certain period of time is fully justified. I've lent and borrowed money, and that reflected the possibilities of that moment, that's not what I'm getting at.

It's more that it sometimes seems like our relationships are so shaped by the transactional logics around us, that we almost lack the imagination of becoming anything other than a bank to a friend, do you know what I mean? As if it were a logical thing.

Lua: I like your bank-friend analogy. It takes me to another fairly automated exchange that I've experienced already more than once, and I'm quite sure also other people can relate to this. I remember moments when I shared with a friend that I was short, in the minus, or properly broke, those who could, would sometimes reply something along the lines of “You can always let me know if you need money“, which was something I used to reply to with a thank you. Most of the time, I would not come back to this, though, and found another solution instead. It's the vagueness of this statement and its lack of transparency, that makes it so difficult to handle for me. Transparency about the offer itself, the other person's financial situation, and any possible conditions. I usually just assume the offer meant borrowing money, because asking whether it was existential support or an invitation to take on debt, often felt like a step I couldn't bring myself to take.

Part of it is my avoidance, not wanting to explain that if you lend me money, I still feel in the minus and still stressed about how to make more in order to pay it back. And in my experience it's often the ones with class privileges or good income who, probably in an attempt to take the stress off you, add things like „no worries at all though with paying it back, you can take your time, I don't need it at the moment“. These are the moments that make me even more aware of how different our positions are, and yet how hard it seems to break out of the scripts.

I had to ask around for money this year, though, as I couldn't pay my training fees and rent anymore. In one-on-one talks with friends I initiated, we always spoke about both our financial

⁷⁷D. Hunter, *Chav Solidarity* (Lumpen, 2022), 276.

situations. And I specifically asked for support, not for a loan. I appreciated the talks I had as we took time to understand each other's situation. Even though I often have a rough idea of my friends' finances, I rarely know how much they actually have in their bank accounts or saved up somewhere else and what role these potential resources play for them in terms of obligations, commitments, and dreams.

And of course, I sometimes operate on false assumptions and probably still do with some of the ones I haven't talked to. I mostly asked friends for help with more or less steady, well-paid jobs, access to middle-class family resources and/or those who already inherited something; others I didn't talk to, because I assumed they are just making ends meet.

Such conversations feel deeply important to me when they break away from the scripts of privacy or vagueness and create space for openness and connection. I try my best to live up to that as well, both when I'm asked for money or support and when I'm in a position to offer it. Being accountable for my privileges and access in relation to others, however, is something I also need to practice when I'm broke.

Kim: I have to think of the interview in the *Sinister Wisdom* where Felicitas, a member of the Prolo-Lesben⁷⁸, says:

“[...] it's easy to be oblivious to classism because we all look alike and have similar lifestyles. But if you look closer there are major differences in how we manage to survive. For us, it was hard to learn that there were women who could get resources from their families but would feel bad about using them. It was too much! We'd say, if they have money and they don't know what to do with it, they can give it to us.”⁷⁹

And I think this points to some really important things: first, that we need to have these conversations, and second, that we need to engage in practices of redistribution. Because we go through life with people, seemingly occupied with the same struggles, but underneath a layer of aesthetics and lifestyle, we often stand on fundamentally different grounds. I guess there is the worry that naming it could create distance, and if there is a lack of accountability, I think that feeling is justified, but it also has the potential to build and strengthen emotional and political ties.

Lua: We brought the acknowledgment of the different grounds to Micha's funeral; it took the form of an attempt at a collective inheritance for me. We had the idea together, but you wrote the text with the support of Max and Theresa. Max read it out loud to everyone when we gathered after the funeral. I dug it out, and I still find it very powerful, both for the words and the effect it had on me.

⁷⁸The Prolo-Lesben (short for 'Proletarische Lesben' / 'Proletarian Lesbians') formed in the 1980s within the radical lesbian-feminist movement in West Berlin. They united lesbians from lower, working-, and poverty-class backgrounds, pushing for greater visibility of class struggles and challenging the dominant influence of educated middle-class culture and norms within the movement.

In 1987, they established an anonymous money redistribution account, through which more resourced lesbians – typically from middle- and upper-class backgrounds – redistributed money to those in existential need. Whether it was to cover a broken washing machine or overdue rent, the fund aimed to provide immediate, practical support rooted in solidarity rather than charity.

⁷⁹“*Anonymous Money Redistribution: Prolo Dykes Making Real Change In West Berlin.*” *Sinister Wisdom*, 1991.

The Attempt Of A Collective Inheritance

We are writing here as friends of Lua. We grew up together, lived together and still do now. Since Micha's death, we have accompanied the process, been there for each other and helped shape the various phases of the farewell.

It has become increasingly clear to us that we have a responsibility not to depoliticize death and life and to deal transparently with the circumstances. Micha died in poverty and without health insurance. This is not arbitrary, but painfully interwoven. Showing solidarity and showing support for one another, all of this seems enormously important to us. For Lua, "inheritance" would above all mean taking on debts, and in order to avoid this, it is rejected. Rejecting the inheritance means giving up the claim to everything material. The only exceptions are photos and personal writings, the taking of which must be strictly documented.

By attempting to think of heritage collectively, we want to address the different material levels of this situation. They concern the moment and, like everything structural, go far beyond it. Above all, we are aiming for the privilege of a little lightness in the time to come.

This means, for example, using the inheritance to compensate for the loss of work in recent weeks and having to work less in the coming months in order to be able to devote more time to the upcoming emotional process. It is also about being able to cover the unfinanced costs of the funeral arrangements and burial. In other words, to take care of what needs to be done with the help of a collective cushion.

Poverty is a reality that is quietly perpetuated. How close we are to it in different ways is often hidden. This is an attempt to bring this structural precarity out of silence. We want to think of heritage as fluid, as not accumulating, as a collective resource that moves to where it is needed, that lets you breathe a sigh of relief for a moment instead of reinforcing inequality.

In this spirit, we invite you to contribute to a collective inheritance for Lua, should your situation allow it. If you would like to transfer something, please transfer it to the account of [REDACTED]:

Name: [REDACTED] IBAN: [REDACTED] BIC:

Zweck: "für Lua"

On June 1st, the collected amount will be transferred from [REDACTED] to Lua. Through [REDACTED] as an intermediary, Lua will receive a collective amount X, without details of individual amounts. Because, regardless of the amount or whether a contribution has been made at all, we want to see it as a collective effort of which those who can and those who cannot are equally a part.

Through it, I received around 8,000 euros, which served as the cushion it was intended to be for almost a year.

Kim: *I haven't read this in a really long time, but I can also still resonate. When we read this out at the funeral, we posed the question of your existential needs to everyone present and actively*

invited them into a form of shared accountability.

But we had started actively talking about money a few years before this, and those conversations were really helpful for me in getting this writing and the whole process in motion.

We talked about the economic discrepancy between my Austrian family background and yours. Particularly the fact that I'll inherit my grandmother's share in the housing project in a little village in Lower Austria, where I grew up with her and my mother alongside six other households, and where the two of them still live today. We explore what that safety net meant or could mean for our relationship, both emotionally and in practical terms. It was, and continues to be, a transformative experience.

I also began having more intentional conversations about money with others. I noticed myself making a conscious effort to name the things I often used to leave unspoken, such as sharing my own economic background and expressing genuine interest in others. More and more, I find myself choosing to leave fewer gaps around money. Instead of this vagueness, I try to speak plainly, to name what is present. It can be a simple yet powerful counter-experience and a refusal of normative scripts⁸⁰.

Because sometimes people would share their financial worries or say things like "I will be an old broke artist," and it's only after explicitly asking that people tell you that they, in fact, will inherit enough to not make them very vulnerable to poverty.

Lua: I've had many of these kinds of conversations already, where other people's (class) unawareness hit me quite hard. It's in casual moments where someone says "I can't afford it," when it's actually their choice, not the reality. Or saying "me too" without reflection when someone shared that they, in fact, are broke – ignoring the fact that having no money on your bank card but still savings elsewhere doesn't actually mean you're broke. But it also happens around me when someone is asked about specific inheritance or property and they answer: "Phew.. I don't know how much it is, it's all so complicated and to be honest I think there are debts on it." And some even implicitly suggest that the burden of managing an asset somehow outweighs the privilege of owning it.

Kim: I have the feeling that the idea that speaking about future inheritance is somewhat morally condemnable also lingers over these talks. This evasiveness and vagueness almost feels like an attempt to stifle the accusation of waiting for someone to die right from the start. I understand that, and of course there is an element of unpredictability that can be taken into account. But I think rather than making this the focus, we should commit to acknowledging familial resources and the emotional security they create. So what I reckon makes this particular subject additionally tricky is that two taboos are meeting, that of death and that of money.

⁸⁰We also started talking to people in a more organised setting and hosted a Talking About Money Round Table, which quickly latched onto the topic of inheritance as the biggest distinguishing factor in terms of economic position. Among the 6 people who came each time, there were some who could not expect any inheritance, others who knew they would inherit (parts of) property and those who came from families with substantial wealth. With those people we met on a regular basis and navigated the discomfort of our different material resources and speculated about strategies of redistribution.

I think all those examples in the end take us to the avoidance of discomfort. Because having these conversations can feel uncomfortable, it reveals things that aren't right and we feel it. I once read the quote "feeling is a legitimate way of knowing" and it stuck with me. I think there are ways that we can let these feelings of discomfort be our guides, rather than something we duck away from.

Lua: Feelings can be a legitimate way of knowing, but they're also shaped by what we've learned, what we engage with, and what we allow in. I would say they don't necessarily reveal some ultimate truth, but they point us toward what needs care and attention.

Kim: Yes, absolutely. For me, some of the most instructive moments arise when I sit and engage with the feelings that surface when I, often with others, attempt to translate theoretical propositions or critique into lived practice. I used to call this the interplay of theory and practice, now I prefer guidance and experimentation and try to embrace that, but in the end it's similar.

What I love about guidance, concretely about being guided though is that it centres not the knowledge, but my relationship with it. And this little shift continuously helps me to narrow a gap, that often left me feeling unsatisfied or simply lost.

When I'm guided I intentionally let myself be guided though my daily life and decision making. I consciously enter into a relationship with a theory, a position or a practice and in doing so, I feel a sense of responsibility toward it growing. It becomes a form of co-creation.

To me this whole process often feels quite unsettling. Bayo Akomolafe reminds us over and over to slow down when times are urgent, slowing down as a shift in awareness.⁸¹ I feel the truth of that, as I try to embody rather than accumulate knowledge.

And while its hard work, it's also where things become real and interesting to me.

The commitment to experimentation helps me collaborate with the imperfect, the messy and even the playful. invites presence and curiosity, it's where we feel contradiction emerge and meaning deepen. When held with care and intention, experimentation can become a way of honouring both complexity and failure. For me experimentation and guidance translate to embracing the consequences of what we know, and exploring ways of collectively translating it into something that feels aligned with our existential needs and desires.

And sometimes there can be an almost scary simplicity in things as well.

Lua: I feel both – guidance and experimentation – add a form of agency to my life in times where sometimes numbness and overwhelm makes me lose sight of possible ways.

Something that I've let me guide is the reminder to „move at the speed of trust.“⁸² It aligns well with the slowing down Bayo speaks of and I'm convinced, that it does not mean, that the steps we take can't be profound or disruptive anymore. In my experience the opposite is the case,

⁸¹Akomolafe, Bayo. "Dr. Bayo Akomolafe on Slowing Down in Urgent Times." Atmos, Interviewed by Ayana Young, 2023.

⁸²This is Mervyn Marcano's remix of Stephen Covey's "speed of trust" concept, and one of the principles of emergent strategy; adrienne maree brown, Emergent Strategy, 42.

slowness can give spaciousness for depth and care. I feel like it's in that space that I can meet others and experiment.

And it's the aspect of trust that brings me to the believe, that in all the blurriness we intentionally create, we mustn't become elusive to each other. Rather I think sometimes it's important to make new promises, to experiment with new certainties we can hold on to if we want deep, ongoing care for each other – against all the odds and limitations the present holds for us.

Class Accountability is to recognize that true accountability demands not only awareness but also practice, especially in how we deal with money, material resources, and existential needs among us: as friends and comrades, lovers and kith, in our communities and way beyond.

Class Accountability is the act of taking responsibility for your class position. It's a call for creating practices and engaging in action.

Class Accountability is relational. It's not just the responsibility of some; it can apply to all of us in relation to others. It means to look around you and to put yourself in relation – again and again. It means not to simplify your own, nor others' positionality in the class matrix. Class – in our eyes – is one lens of observation, one tool to see social relations, and not a clear and unambiguous category or identity.

Class Accountability is inviting us to mindfully confront discomfort, shame and social taboos around money and class differences and to learn collectively how to navigate them, in a way that fosters trust and solidarity rather than performative positioning, polarization or division.

Class Accountability is moving toward openness and transparency about your financial status, privileges, and needs.

Class Accountability is to initiate conversations about money and existential needs, so that economic inequalities within your relationships are not ignored but addressed.

Class Accountability is to bring up class dynamics and power relations when no one else does, especially when silence would benefit you.

Class Accountability is to take responsibility for struggles of others and to make them a shared matter.

Class Accountability is to step aside – from jobs, positions, visibility, speaking or grants – and suggest other people if someone with less class privilege could do it instead and would benefit more.

Class Accountability is to cover or subsidize costs for people with less money to pay their bills, access mental or physical health care, or participate in events, vacations, or political work.

Class Accountability is to regularly give away part of your income or savings – either directly to individuals or through mutual aid and reparations funds.

Class Accountability is to think and reflect about future Inheritances, the safety they give, and how you can expand that safety to others.

Class Accountability is to collectivize the decision-making power over your funds and properties.

Class Accountability is to redistribute (parts or all of your) money, assets, and properties, and through that, the emotional-existential securities which come along with them.

Class Accountability is to organize your will so that your inheritance is redistributed along political lines, not just family lines.

Class Accountability is to follow the call to join classes.

Collectivization Contract

Declaration of future co-heirs.

1. Preamble

We recognize the systemic injustice of wealth accumulation and distribution, and that inheritance is a key mechanism through which inequality and class relations are reproduced.

With this agreement, we commit to collectivise our (future) inheritances.

We take this step to interrupt the transmission and concentration of wealth through *family* lines. By shifting the control over inherited assets from the individual to the collective, we aim to challenge structures that uphold class power among us and within society.

It is a commitment to share resources in ways that foster individual and collective well-being, being accountable for imperial and colonial power structures and in order to fight for more equitable futures. We want to support those of us without access to such resources and those way beyond our own circles. By sharing the power over these funds and properties, we want to come to good decision collectively, strengthen our capacity for mutual support, enable everyone of us to rest as well as to fight back more vigorously.

2. Scope of the Commitment

Upon receiving an inheritance (financial, property, or material), we hereby declare,

- that we will from now on inherit everything together. Be it money, properties, debts, or material resources.
- that we will from now on inherit everything together, despite the following:

3. Obligations

We hereby declare to also collectivise the obligations and responsibilities coming with the inheritances, be it assets, properties, or other things, and to handle them responsibly and with class accountability.

4. Collectivization & Redistribution Method

- The inheritance(s) will be equally split among the persons signing here (7.).
- The inheritance(s) will be split among the persons signing here (7.), the following way:

We agree to **collectively decide** on the use and distribution of these funds.

Other:

We will consult the following individuals or group(s) as advisors before taking a decision:

5. Further

- We will practice **financial transparency** with those around us, sharing updates and inviting feedback.
- We agree to hold at least one collective conversation (before or after an inheritance is received) about how the funds might be used to support our shared needs, security, and futures.
- We will practice transparency with those we name in this agreement as witnesses or advisors, including sharing financial updates when requested or something has changed.
- _____

6. Signatures of Co-heirs

Date:

Names: _____

Signatures: _____

7. Accountability and Witness

We name the following people or group(s) as witnesses of this agreement who will hold us accountable for what we declare here.

Names: _____

Signatures: _____

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"Die Zukunft wird anarchistisch virulent."
Micha 2023

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