# Radical Mothering for Abolitionist Futures Post-COVID-19

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The initial effects of COVID-19 coupled with the current uprisings against police violence have torn us from our common sense of normalcy. This sudden shift in the toxic state of living under the violence of racial capitalism, white supremacy, and settler colonialism affords us the opportunity to uplift centuries of communal wisdom that abound all around us. The current pandemic made it increasingly apparent that capitalism, not simply COVID-19, is the disaster.


Mamas Activating Movements for Abolition and Solidarity

The killing by white vigilantes (including an ex-cop) of Ahmaud Arbery on February 23, and the police killings of Breonna Taylor on March 13, George Floyd on May 25 and Tony McDade on May 27 reignited the righteous anger stemming from 500 years of U.S. state violence. In this moment of mass anxiety at the loss of work and economic security, these uprisings have expressed outright refusal against continued abuse by a country built upon the mass genocide of Black and Indigenous peoples.

Five years ago, when abolition began to hit mainstream conversation, adages of “burn it all down” never led to its physical manifestation in a concerted sense. Now, as images circulate of the Minneapolis police department on fire and Black bodies raging and protesting in the streets, it is a new moment, a legitimately defiant one. This system no longer serves us. It has never served us. It must fall.

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The violence surrounding state responses to COVID has bolstered ongoing campaigns to defund police and invest in community institutions such as schools and healthcare. As people struggle to adjust to these extraordinary conditions of a global pandemic and mass uprisings, our hope lies in the end of generations of genocide and the beginnings of a new world based upon alternative ways of being in the world.

The  values of mutual aid and collective care that environmental justice and abolitionist social movements, disability justice activists, regenerative or feminist economy movements, Indigenous people and others have been calling for are taking hold in the everyday practices of local communities. At this moment, we believe our movements have a great deal to learn from one group of people in particular—mothers and caretakers trapped within the prison industrial complex.

George Floyd spent his last, final breaths amongst us calling, calling, calling, for his mother.

Tamika Palmer has now spoken out to fight for the lost life of her daughter, Breonna Taylor, joining the mothers of Kalief Browder, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice.

All of these heartbreaking stories, coupled with the invisible histories of state violence against Black mothers, which reach back to the rape and sexual assault of enslaved African women as a means for reproducing enslaved people in service to White capital to the killing of black mothers like Korryn Gaines, bring to stark light that people who do the labor of mothering are expected to accelerate the progress of capital and serve as nurturers for their family and community systems, all while enduring systematic targeting

—including murder–by the same state apparatus from which they are fighting to protect their loved ones.

As a result, mothers trapped within the prison industrial complex in one way or another have been modeling what it looks like to integrate care work (often conceived of as "service") and political organizing as part of a collective, revolutionary project. Yet all along, the labor, visions, and strategies of these very individuals tend to remain invisible within many social movements in ways that we have an opportunity now to uplift and reconsider.

There has long existed in many of our organizing spaces a silent devaluing of the realm of reproduction, including mothering and caretaking, whether biological or non-biological.While those who are mothering attend, lead, and assume the responsibility of caretaker in organizing spaces, it is often true that our positions as anchors of our movements' micro-communities are overlooked as opposed to engaged as an asset.

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The increased neoliberal professionalization of organizing puts pressure on movements to focus on and respond to questions about the metrics of productivity, such as: how many actions are able to be executed, how many members are joining, and how many dollars can be raised in grant funding? Core principles of relationship-building and collaborative thinking suffer due

to the need for more campaigns, more rallies, and more wins—understandable priorities. On the ground, social movement resistance to the neo-liberal professionalization of activism reinstates the discrepancy in value between "political organizing" and "service," and has the effect of intentionally or unintentionally reinforcing the devaluing of mothering and caretaking forms of labor.

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

## Context: Mamas Activating Movements for Abolition and Solidarity

We co-founded the collective Mamas Activating Movements for Abolition and Solidarity (MAMAS) in Chicago to resist the interconnected systems of prisons, anti-immigrant violence, war and colonization, with a focus on uplifting the movement possibilities of mother-survivors of these systems. Here, we dive into our work around prisons by focusing on practices of mothering among people who have been incarcerated themselves or those with children currently or previously incarcerated.

Like many feminist abolitionists have been saying, we insist that the violence of prisons extends far beyond prison walls into working class families, neighborhoods, and Black and Brown communities. A number of folks active in MAMAS are mothering individuals who were physically or psychologically tortured by police into making false confessions, and identify as survivors of police and prison violence in their own right.

As Mary L. Johnson, mother of police torture survivor Michael Johnson, puts it when reflecting on the ripple effect of prisons on her own life: "As long as my son is doing life, I'm a lifer." Chicago is home to a powerful movement that has won reparations for police violence and continues to demand justice around police violence and prison abolition. Chicago's torture survivors have

served or are still serving long prison sentences. Our work draws upon this long history of organizing and collective knowledge production around prison abolition in Chicago, as well as our personal histories as people of Arab and African descent who have been mothering under these systems of oppression, in addition to the fierce and unapologetic body of scholarship-activism on revolutionary mothering.

We work from a number of important assumptions; that

1. People who mother incarcerated individuals are survivors of gender violence, specifically reproductive injustice, given that
    1. the state violently denies them the ability to mother and to care for and protect their children, and
    2. the criminal justice system blatantly covers up state violence by calling *their* mothering into question, assuming that unfit parenting is to blame for their child's "criminality;"
2. That the purpose of the criminal justice system is to serve and protect white supremacy and racial capitalism; and
3. We have to care for ourselves and each other on the long road to justice.

In our work, we use the idea of mothering to refer to reproductive forms of labor that have, historically, been specifically gendered as female/feminine while at the same time we recognize that such caring work is not performed exclusively by those recognized as women and/or by those biologically related to those receiving care.

## The Power of Mutual Aid and Identification on Behalf of the Collective

Regina Russell, mother of torture survivor Tamon Russell, says when she first met Armanda, mother of torture survivor Gerald Reed, she turned to her union brother, Joe, and whispered to him, "She's telling my story." Regina describes feeling helpless and suffering in silence until she connected with Armanda's strength, which gave her permission to break her own silence and share for the first time, in public, the story of what happened to her own son. Armanda says she is going to stay in the fight to release her son until the

bitter end because there are so many others going through the same struggle.

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

JeNae Taylor, while working as the Fellowship Coordinator for the National Bailout Collective, talked with us about the power of connection between mothers impacted by incarceration:

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

Connecting with each other provides nourishment and breaking the isolation that comes with living with the ripple effects of incarceration. Bella, founder of Sister Survivor Network and daughter to parents who were incarcerated, tells us she learns collective ways of being from her mother's incarceration:

> *What my mother and other folks she knows that have been incarcerated do is give themselves permission to see themselves in a different way, as valuable and not disposable. I want to follow in my mother's footsteps. She*

> *has never left any of her friends behind. I have had my mother's examples to show me that in real life and real time.*

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

Bertha Escamilla's son, torture survivor Nick Eschamilla, was released in 2008, but Bertha continues to collect data on the cases of all Chicago's torture survivors, including many tortured by cops whose violence is not yet publicly known and of those who have yet to qualify for reparations. Mothers, loved ones, lawyers, researchers and activists have all relied on the data she shares–including information on ninety-two cases of police violence– to seek justice. She looks into police reports, locates information about each case, contacts family members by phone or meets them at the courthouse, and explains to them what to do and what to look for.

Reflecting on the need for collective informationsharing and relationship-building, Bertha explains:

> *We are put into this situation where we don't have any knowledge of what we're supposed to do. We're not educated to know about the law. We are factory workers or just driving a bus. We [mothers] encourage other mothers to look for things pertaining to their case so they know what to ask the lawyers. We do this with a lot of the families.*

Forced to learn the law and figure it out collectively, Bertha and other activists with MAMAS replace a corporate individualist system that depends on control over people and knowledge for the purposes of exploitation with a horizontal system of knowledge-sharing for the purposes of resistance. In community, they are caring for each other and those behind bars through *both* emotional support *and* fighting for justice on the premise that organizing and care are simultaneously revolutionary. Here, collective care-work is a way of life, born out of the realities of mothering while being targeted by prisons and police.

Bella remembers how her mother, who served years in prison, continued to write letters to her still incarcerated friends and to their children after she was released: "I see a whole lot of women in my family who take on those roles. It's not really amplified in a way that a lot of other work is because it is not *work* for them. It is life."

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

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

Esther Hernandez, whose sons are Juan and Rosendo, says she is fighting for everyone, not only her own child:

> *Every year in November we hold a potluck and fill out Christmas cards for all of them [inmates incarcerated with her sons]. The ones who are out tell me we are giving them hope. We are all here to fight for our loved ones. Together we have something to offer. All around Chicago, there is corruption with the police and we want to let people know it is going on.*

Indeed, folks connected to MAMAS care for many individuals to whom they are not biologically related. Kathy Wanek Levettman's best friend's son, Matthew Echevarria, is an incarcerated torture survivor. As Kathy puts it, "The thing is, I love him too now. I have my own personal relationship with him, that's why I don't drop out." Likewise, Bertha regularly visits and speaks to prisoners on the phone over a decade after her biological son's release: "I am involved with anyone who has loved ones incarcerated."

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

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

This collective care-work thus serves very practical purposes such as the sharing of information and resources, but it also has symbolic power. Being present to witness and support each other's struggles disrupts the 1950's

heteropatriarchal-capitalist ideal of the "nuclear family" –and rejects the negative stigmatization of those who are incarcerated as well as those who love them. Caring for one another unleashes collective organizing power—whether it is by mobilizing people to show up in court or raising the political consciousness of people unaware of the racist and corrupt police and prison systems.

## Mamas Leading the Way Forward

Nationalist, colonialist, and capitalist forces seekto devalue and exploit individuals, families, and communities; people who mother have long been targets of these systems because the caring work they do stand as obstacles to this process. In Chicago, mother-survivors share a fierce determination to collectively challenge repressive systems and corporate vultures who profit from incarceration. They nurture one another, declare their love for each other, and seek not only to bring their own children home, but also to expose and protest the inhumanity of the entire prison system. As they integrate care and collective unity with resistance, they are a force to be reckoned with. While they stand on the front lines of the fight for future generations, social movements of all types would do well to let them lead by example.

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

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

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

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

most urgently collective ways of being in the world. Indeed, the labor of mothering in the face of state violence is an inherently radical act.

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