

**The Limits of Mutual Aid and the Promise of Liberation  
within Radical Politics of Care**

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**Abstract**

The present COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated conditions for continued survival, and community-based mutual aid networks have appeared seemingly organically to address such conditions. I argue these networks often fail to recognize capitalism's mediation of caring labor, namely, the processes of survival and reproduction which are consistently undermined and demanded by capital's accumulation. Instead, I propose a politics of care built on insights from the Black Panther Party's and the Wages for Housework campaign's respective responses to a lack of reproductive resources, which emphasize the position of survival struggles as a primary site of anti-capitalist political agitation and mobilization.

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**I. COVID-19 and the Category of Care: An Introduction**

In 2020, the so-called “Crisis of Care” came to a deadly breaking point with the spread of the novel COVID-19 upper respiratory virus, which at the time of writing has claimed 4.3 million lives globally out of over 203 million confirmed cases (Fraser 2017, 21; Worldometer 2021). In the continuing struggle against COVID-19, the question of care has once again come to the fore of political discussions, arguments, and disagreements about the distribution of resources worldwide. The workers of the world found their basic reproductive necessities, such as food, PPE, hygiene products, and shelter, once again in false scarcity due to capitalism’s mismanagement of a crisis. To combat the lack of universal and accessible social services in the United States and many parts of the world, regular people were called to action and worked to establish networks of mutual aid on social media and collaborative virtual platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Slack. These networks came together to provide the very reproductive resources in scarcity, like masks, groceries, money for utility bills, etc. through community fundraising and donations.

This is neither the first nor the last time in history that one’s very survival has become a process of political contestation. Consequently, it is no longer tenable to continue to ignore the centrality of care within the larger project of political economy and its resulting strategies of political mobilization. While I acknowledge the tremendous impacts of mutual aid on local communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper seeks to produce a structural assessment regarding the viability of these newly formed networks to contain within them the possibility of a direct, coordinated attack on capital. To do this, I turn to two different historical political movements, which also responded to a lack of reproductive resources and used basic processes of survival as primary sites of political agitation and mobilization. In surveying the activities of the Black Panther Party and the Wages for Housework campaign in the 1960s and ‘70s, I elucidate histories of survival struggles in order to recontextualize their insights about the possibility of mutual aid as a primary tactic for anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and feminist political organizing. Ultimately, while survival is a struggle worth politicizing, it would seem that there is not always a guarantee that struggles to survive yield a revolutionary political consciousness. After a brief examination of the continuities and discrepancies between the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Wages for Housework (WfH) movements,<sup>1</sup> I conclude that only when combined with sustained and multifaceted political education, which intentionally seeks to produce a shared analysis of the current state of our world, does struggling to survive create a shared horizon of revolutionary praxis. Consequently, mutual aid as it appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic is critiqued for its inability to continuously produce such a shared political analysis grounded in a capacious and complex account of class as determined by race, gender, and geographical location. Ultimately, I argue that to create a radical politic of care incapable of being co-opted into further securing

the conditions for capital's domination, community care needs to be rooted in political education with a multidimensional class analysis in order to transform survival into opposition.

## II. Caring Labor and Ambiguity: A Theoretical Note

Sites of life-making can become integral to collective projects of survival under conditions of dehumanization, extraordinary violence, and psychological warfare. Black feminists from within the U.S. context have pointed toward the home and familial relationships as an incredibly powerful site of resistance through which Black people are able to reproduce their own lives in the face of insurmountable odds (Davis 1981; hooks 1990; Threadcraft 2016). In these and many other Black feminist works, the relationship among practices of care, survival, and resistance become articulated as nascent political projects. Yet, the family unit itself is often a primary site of the reproduction of compulsory heterosexuality and hierarchical gender roles which are deeply reliant on gendered divisions of labor, and can itself be a site of acute violence. Consequently, securing survival through the family unit is ambiguous in terms of the scope and the objective of its resistance. The ambiguity of this survival as resistance both within and outside the family unit and its relationship to political praxis is the primary inquiry I make in this paper.

In order to better articulate the framework through which I investigate these terms within the histories of the BPP and the WfH movements, it is essential to connect the ambiguity of survival as resistance to the wider processes of life-making and life-maintenance which could be loosely called social reproduction. The work it takes to create human life, and to protect and nurture that life, whether it be your own life or that of a loved one, is an unending and often thankless "job." Questions regarding the structural relationship between capitalism and human reproduction have been prominent at different points throughout the histories of socialist and feminist critique (Ferguson 2020, 41). According to Sue Ferguson (2020) in *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*, it was intervention of Lise Vogel's *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* in 1983 which proposed a more robust notion of social reproduction as not solely dependent on the universalization of the housewife figure (111). Current Social Reproduction feminists often take up Vogel's underappreciated work in order to reformulate processes of social reproduction as sites of anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and feminist struggle (Bhattacharya 2017).

Tithi Bhattacharya states that Marxism makes a claim that workers who produce the commodities are the "beating heart" of the capitalist system, but Social Reproduction feminists want to ask, "who produces the worker?" (Pluto Press 2017). I might suggest taking Bhattacharya's question further, by claiming a need to evaluate the processes which produce the working class as a whole. Given practical limitations, I cannot unpack the intricacies of who does or does not belong to the working class; however, it is worth emphasizing at the outset that for Social Reproduction feminists generally, and for my project of articulating a politics of care in particular, class is one part of the matrix of our social order mediated by capital for its continued accumulation. Part of the value of structurally linking the realm of reproduction to that of

production is that it produces an analysis of capitalist logic which no longer reduces all forms of oppression to its “base” economic form. As Nancy Fraser has articulated in her exchange with Michael Dawson on expropriation, we can think of capitalism as “... not an economy but a *social system of domination*” (Fraser 2016, 165). Even though Marx himself underemphasized this reality by focusing primarily on wage-labor exploitation, both Fraser and Dawson argue that the notion of expropriation is particularly essential to understanding capitalism’s deep entanglement with racial and gender oppression.

While I cannot elaborate the powerful and productive nuances and debates within the strands of feminist theory Ferguson calls Social Reproduction feminism, it is essential to note two primary contributions which underlie this paper: 1) Reproductive labor, and consequently the survival which it procures, is ambiguous because global capitalism thrives on, and in fact requires, human capacity to labor. When we reproduce ourselves, and by that I mean when we survive even in order to resist, we are also providing capital the means for its continued accumulation. 2) This understanding of class analysis and political economy is inherently multidimensional in order to account for the ways wider social orders impact, and are impacted by, the social and economic order of global capitalism. There are internal debates about the theoretical value of the approach labeled “intersectionality” (McNally 2017; Ferguson 2016), but when evaluating the histories of the BPP and WfH political perspectives, we can think of class as fundamentally constituted by processes of racialization and patriarchal norms about gender and sexuality. The impact of race on the project of survival was a central concern for the BPP organizing efforts toward which we now turn.

### **III. The Black Panther Party: Survival, Revolution, and Revolt**

In her insightful retelling of the history of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, Robyn Spencer’s (2016) *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* offers an organizational analysis of the BPP’s development. Spencer’s extensive archival research supports a close reading of the Party’s survival programs and how they were key to the overall Party platform, which guided the political objectives and activities of the BPP. Well-known historian and former Party member, Paul Alkebulan (2007), argues the Party’s founding members, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, “were searching for answers to America’s seemingly intractable racial problems” (4). Unlike the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and popular Civil Rights leaders, Seale and Newton were uninterested in nonviolent or non-confrontational solutions. In 1966, the Black Panther Party was officially born with the express aim of ending political brutality and the creation of a ten-point program which sought to ameliorate the conditions in which Black communities were suffering (Alkebulan 2007, 5). After a couple years of armed demonstrations emphasizing the necessity of Black self-defense, armed police patrols, and a few violent interactions with the police which left some Party members killed by cops, Newton was arrested in 1967. The national campaign to “Free Huey” followed, mobilizing hundreds of new members, with BPP branches popping up all over the U.S. (Spencer 2016, 56–60). Thereafter, the Party faced a slew of obstacles challenging the efficacy of their organizational practices and tactics.

Spencer presents the tumultuous period of brutal state repression at the hands

of the FBI's counterintelligence program COINTELPRO through an emphasis on its effects for the women Party members (2016, 89). She notes that as radical Black leaders and members were arrested or targeted with unprecedented and intrusive surveillance techniques, women became the foundation of the Party. An informal survey conducted by Bobby Seale stated that in 1969 women made up two-thirds of the Party at the time (Cleaver 2001, 125). When Newton's conviction for killing an Oakland police officer was overturned in 1970, he was released on bail and circulated an open letter formally commenting on the necessity of support for both the Women's and Gay Liberation Movements (Spencer 2016, 96). Given the financial pressures of consistently rotating bail funds needed to get their comrades out of prison, Spencer notes that many Panthers lived collectively and divisions of labor around housework were often contested and contradicted Newton's claim of formal gender equality (105). She carefully concludes that, "[i]nternal debates around sexuality, gender politics, and leadership simmered under the surface because many [Party members] viewed them as deferrable at a time of political instability" (105). Alternatively, the internal debates which took center stage within the Party revolved around leadership, militarism, and Party loyalty.

In the period of restructuring between 1971 and 1974, the Party's survival programs became an "organizational priority" around which the Panthers rebuilt themselves in the wake of continued state repression (Spencer 2016, 116). While the Free Breakfast for Children Program has received a lot of mainstream attention, one of the most successful and longest running BPP survival programs was the Oakland Community Learning Center (OCLC) which began in 1971. Spencer claims that having such a solid program grounded in the community actually opened the doors for new survival programs to emerge when specific needs were identified. Quoting a taped interview with Ericka Huggins, Huggins recalls, "a number of new programs have developed just by having the school here..." and then goes on to link the Seniors against a Fearful Environment program with the creation of a welfare referral system. This demonstrates the wholistic and intergenerational organizing that was able to happen because of the Center (119). The OCLC was completely tuition free until 1977 after a failed campaign to elect Bobby Seale as Mayor and Elaine Brown on City Council left the Party in financial deficits, and participants were asked to pay up to \$35 a month (Spencer 2016, 186). Internal Party reports from this time indicate that the level of "political work," such as door-to-door organizing and follow-up with participants in the survival programs, was significantly decreased. The Oakland BPP chapter found it difficult to do "any of the other activities that are done to hold the previously established networks and to build new face to face relationships with people on the precinct level" (156).

To highlight some of the radical political theory which might have undergirded or resulted from engagement with Party's politics, I now turn to the work of two influential political prisoners associated with the BPP and the struggle for Black liberation: Assata Shakur and George Jackson. It is clear that big names in the BPP leadership such as Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, Elaine Brown, and David Hillard deeply determined the principles and frameworks under which the Party operated. In highlighting a perspective from below, that of rank-and-file members and former members, I seek to highlight "imprisoned intellectuals" who represent the effects of a critical engagement

with the BPP's revolutionary framework (James 2003, xiv). Firstly, in reviewing George Jackson and his understanding of the development of political consciousness, struggles to survive are sutured to a revolutionary project and politic. Secondly, Assata Shakur's autobiography reveals some notable limitations of the BPP around political education from the perspective of a Black revolutionary woman who decided to leave the Party to pursue a different path toward Black liberation.

George Jackson's (1972) *Blood in My Eye*, is a collection of essays and letters written during his incarceration and finished mere days before his murder in August of 1971. It offers a searing critique of the fascistic "Amerikan"<sup>2</sup> state while simultaneously producing a wealth of concrete suggestions regarding political, organizational tactics and frameworks through which Black people can fight against the State (ix). Jackson's reflections on the dialectical movement between survival, or meeting "on the ground needs", and a revolutionary political education, highlight some of the aspects of political organizing that the BPP struggled with in the latter part of the Party's existence. His writings identify the need for "dual power," which seeks to create a sustainable alternative for community control within Black communities (113). Before creating the autonomous infrastructure necessary for community control, it is important to create a more livable life for working class Black communities. For Jackson, the conditions of revolutionary consciousness are crucially preceded by the condition of a full stomach, free medical care, and a safe place for children and adults to rest their heads. He quotes Newton on the survival programs in a "Letter to a Comrade\*", stating that, "the survival programs satisfy the deep needs of the community but they are not solutions to our problems. That is why we call them survival programs, meaning survival pending revolution" (Jackson 1972, 70). Jackson goes on to claim that the survival programs "fill a very real vacuum" already existing within Black communities where people are living in appalling conditions without having basic bodily needs met, such as food and shelter (70). He argues that this will demonstrate to working class Black people what it means to organize around their needs, calling this the introduction of the "people's government" (71-72). For Jackson at the time of his writing, the BPP was the strongest political apparatus which existed outside of the liberal façade of electoral politics.

Jackson (1972) contends that the subsequent step to meeting the needs of the people is having the vanguard lead the people in the construction of its own autonomous people's government – a vanguard Jackson explicitly states will be the Black Panther Party (74). Jackson writes that:

Consciousness grows in spirals. Growth implies feeding and being fed. We feed consciousness by feeding people, addressing ourselves to their needs, the basic and social needs, working, organizing toward a united national left. *After the people have created something that they are willing to defend*, a wealth of new ideals and an autonomous subsistence infrastructure, then they are ready to be brought into "open" conflict with the ruling class and its supports (84).

The key of Jackson's call to "feed" our consciousness is not only to nourish the physical body, but to then put that nourished body to work. Work in this context cannot mean wage labor for the capitalist, but instead refers to the creation of the autonomous

infrastructure which seeks firstly to meet unmet needs, and secondly to build a political consciousness within Black communities through creating alternatives together (76–77). Although Jackson does not clearly enumerate what the people’s government will look like, or under which guiding principles it will operate, he juxtaposes it against the process of withdrawal. He argues that after the revolution has “failed,” retreat is not a practical way to rebuild resistance. Instead, Jackson uplifts Newton’s concept of the Black commune, which he sees as one way the revolutionary class could construct “a political, social, and economic infrastructure, capable of filling the vacuum that has been left by the establishment ruling class...” (122). Clearly, the people’s government is intended to meet unmet needs “on at least a subsistence level,” but it also involves creating conditions for autonomy from within the contradictory position of what Jackson calls the “Black Colony” (122).

When the bulk of the money made through the Party became directed toward electoral campaigns and the security for high-ranking officials, the survival programs lost the emphasis of building face-to-face relationships with the people. The clinics still offered free medical and dental services, but there was no follow-up or invitation for further Party involvement after the services were procured (Spencer 2016, 159). While stomachs might have been fed and illnesses abated, the construction of autonomous community structures waned. This is particularly evident when the main Party activities were voters’ registration drives during the 1977 Brown/Seale election campaign. Is electoral politics an infrastructure of Black autonomy that people will be, as Jackson notes, willing to defend? The BPP’s relationship to the people in Black communities is not static throughout its history. On my reading, the ultimate downfall of the BPP came largely in part from the highly successful counterrevolutionary campaign of COINTELPRO that separated the BPP from the people it sought to serve out of security concerns. Additionally, the focus on political projects of legitimacy, such as electoral politics, threatened to institutionalize and de-fang a revolutionary force whose original intension was to jeopardize the stability of the Amerikan empire. This tension appears in Assata Shakur’s autobiography *ASSATA*. In it, she recalls a riveting personal history of her involvement with the Black Liberation Movement which led to her capture and imprisonment by the state for seven years before escaping to Cuba (Davis 2003, 64). Her favorite time in the BPP was spent working with the Free Breakfast Program as she described the work to be an “absolute delight” (Shakur 1987, 219). Alternatively, Shakur found the education requirements for building the internal Party consciousness to be incomplete.

Although the major reasons for Shakur’s departure from the Party were due to internal conflicts between Newton and other longtime members, she found the political education program to be inadequate to its task. She describes the political education (or PE) program as having three levels: one for community members, one for official BPP members of a cadre, and one for the highest level of leadership in the Party (Shakur 1987, 232). Interestingly enough, the community classes which focused on the Party’s ten-point program and “general objectives and philosophies of the BPP” were the most engaging (221). Her experience with the cadre PE classes was noticeably worse. She recalls that, “[m]ost of the time whoever was giving the class discussed what we were studying and explained it, but without giving the underlying issues or putting it in any

historical context” (221). Shakur bemoans the fact that even though they could recite quotes from Mao’s *Little Red Book*, many cadre members still thought the US Civil War was fought to free the slaves. She notes that, “to a lot of Panthers, however, struggle consisted of only two aspects: picking up the gun and serving the people” (221). To be clear, Shakur was not principally opposed to the use of armed force in revolutionary struggle, which is attested by her connection to the Black Liberation Army, but that for her the picking up of the gun is part of a history of Black peoples struggling within the U.S. and around the world to liberate themselves and their people. Contextualizing that history and one’s place within it is of the utmost importance.

Without centering the construction of multifaceted political analyses, different BPP chapters sometimes found difficulty sustaining the growth of the political consciousness of the wider Black community in which they were embedded. Despite having known several members with keen political insight, Shakur observes that there was not an organized attempt to spread that consciousness throughout the Party in general. Additionally, those best at organizing were often the busiest and had little time to teach their prowess to comrades. Shakur hypothesizes this deficiency was bred simultaneously from exponential Party growth in a short period of time, combined with the brutal state repression which was a feature of the BPP’s existence “almost from its inception” (Shakur 1987, 222). Understandably, it would be difficult for the vanguard elements, as Jackson suggests, to feed a political consciousness to the people that the Party has not sufficiently fed to its members. There is, again, an unfortunate separation between the important work of meeting unmet needs, and the growth of a wide and complex shared political analysis necessary to unite a group of people constantly under attack from capital and its agents of safeguard within the State.

The activities of the Black Panther Party impacted a whole generation of young people, especially young Black people, in their struggle for Black liberation. The history of the BPP demonstrates an unwavering commitment to its community and the transformation of their daily experiences. To politicize the very survival of marginalized populations, which capital seeks to simultaneously exploit and destroy, makes the maintenance of such lives – the caring labors that one’s community performs to ensure their existence in a world determined to obliterate them – a revolutionary act. And yet, bare survival, with only a daily reproduction of our bodily and human needs, is not enough to levy a strong opposition to the capitalist, and perhaps following Jackson’s analysis, fascist Amerikan state. When survival is politicized, there are important and sometimes unspoken gendered divisions of labor which become exacerbated, and the BPP encountered difficulty appropriately integrating an account of such divisions into their political activities. In order to unpack the political consequences of these sexual and gendered divisions of labor, I turn toward the international Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s which sought to politicize “women’s work” as an integral part of a feminist class politic.

#### **IV. Wages Against Housework: “We Can’t Afford to Work for Love”**

In the 2017 volume, *The New York Wages for Housework Committee: History, Theory, and Documents*, Silvia Federici and co-editor Arlene Austin, reprint key documents, posters, and internal memos from the New York Wages for Housework Committee based on

Federici's personal archive. The book is thus an incomplete history with many pieces of documentation missing (Federici 2017, 11). Even with this lacuna, the archival material which details the demands and political framework of the Committee combined with Federici's retrospective commentaries offer a unique glimpse into a highly marginalized and vilified movement within the larger Women's Liberation Movement during the 1960s & '70s. After outlining both its theoretical foundation and the resulting tactics, I consider more specifically the appearance and activities of the autonomous Black Women for Wages for Housework group. This group's activities, as well as Selma James's work, the leader in the WfH London chapter, emphasizes the differential impact of race, class, and sex on women's work. Not only did WfH politicize the monotonous and daily reproductive labor of millions of women, but they saw refusal of this labor as a key to any winning strategy toward an anti-capitalist and feminist revolutionary project.

The international movement for Wages for Housework began in 1972 in Padova, Italy at a not-so-serendipitous meeting of four women all hailing from different countries. This meeting was partially due to the recent publication and circulation of an essay "Women and the Subversion of the Community", as well as the lived experiences of frustration with developing radical and feminist alternatives to more "traditional communist parties" (Federici 2017, 18). Foundational documents such as the 1972 "Statement of the International Feminist Collective" and the 1974 "Theses on Wages for Housework", detail arguments about the marginalization of the wageless worker. Such arguments were in efforts against the inclination of other socialist feminists who argue that women formed a "sex class" of their own outside of socioeconomic status. Instead, WfH feminists claimed that what divides unwaged workers from waged workers is "power, not class" (Federici 2017, 31). Instead of abandoning class analysis, the WfH feminists openly called for a redefinition of "class" itself since the traditional Marxian definition seemed to elide not only wageless women workers, but those colonized peoples in the capitalist periphery. The WfH collective writes, "[c]lass struggle and feminism for us are one and the same thing, feminism expressing the rebellion of that section of the class without whom the class struggle cannot be generalised, broadened, and deepened" (30). Accordingly, a class struggle which chooses to forgo agitating around the struggles of women, actually undermines itself since the struggle cannot be universalized nor expanded without radicalizing and incorporating women's paid and unpaid labor.

In their landmark 1972 essay "Women and the Subversion of the Community," Dalla Costa and James (2019) articulate housework, or the unwaged caring labor unevenly foisted upon women, as the hidden basis through which the exploitation of the wage is secured.<sup>3</sup> The primary method of this obfuscation includes rendering the work being done by women in the household a "personal service outside of capital," (Dalla Costa and James 2019, 23) or, as much of the WfH pamphlets and posters allege, "a labor of love" (Federici 2017, 43). The authors detail the ways in which women are bereaved of what small pleasures may be afforded under the capitalist mode of organization: their sexuality is co-opted to ensure the reproduction of labor power broadly; they are isolated in their homes and share no space with other houseworkers with whom they may at least commiserate; their children are being indoctrinated and

subjugated by the educational system; and any bargaining power that the waged worker may gain from technological innovations is lost on the housewife as her work, even with a dishwasher, never seems to be complete (Dalla Costa and James 2019, 20–26). By arguing that the unwaged work of the housewife – and the authors emphasize that the working-class housewife is the figure under investigation at present (18) – actually secures the “freedom” of the waged worker, Dalla Costa and James are able to importantly argue that the exploitation of women is conditioned not merely by individual men, i.e. their husbands, but the entire capitalist class as a whole.

Additionally, the authors challenge Marxian political economy even further by claiming that the unwaged work which secures the freedom of the waged worker is in fact productive, which is to say, it creates surplus value.<sup>4</sup> The authors argue that given the historical institutionalization of familial relations under developing capitalism, it is clear that the only person “liberated” from reproductive work within the unit of the hetero-nuclear family is the man. This is not because he does not need to be clothed, fed, washed, and emotionally engaged, but because he is not structurally coerced to perform such labor on himself or anyone else. Instead, Dalla Costa and James (2019) state that unwaged housework is not a superstructural phenomenon, meaning historically contingent and malleable to capital’s accumulation, but in fact represents a key dependency within the base structure of capitalistic exploitation (30). If we fail to grasp the family unit as an elemental unit for the creation of surplus value, “then we will be moving in a limping [sic] revolution – one that will always perpetuate and *aggravate a basic contradiction in the class struggle, and a contradiction that is functional to capitalist development*” (Dalla Costa and James 2019, 20). Instead of agitating this division against the ruling class, the male-dominated left exacerbates this unequal internal division of labor as non-essential and secondary to wage-labor exploitation, which actually prevents class struggle from broader realization.

Given this account of the labor women perform and the explicit theorization of class as a majorly influential but not completely reductive aspect of woman’s oppression, WfH’s political framework was perhaps rather unique at the time of their organizing. Even though they were a small group, they faced immense backlash from both within and outside of the feminist movement. Both the “white male left” and the liberal feminist movement saw the demand for wages as deterrent to the kind of “equality” they sought, i.e. equal opportunity employment and exploitation (Lopez 2012, 8). However, naming wages as the primary goal of the movement was certainly limiting. Instead of creating a process in which women struggle against the conditions of their care work, the understanding of their struggle became entangled with ideological valuations of time and money. Such capitalist ideology is central to the false narrative that wage-labor occurs on the “free” market as an exchange between “equals.” It was unclear to those outside of the movement that WfH sought to abolish the conditions under which such work is performed, as opposed to (the ultimately futile task of) making women’s work valuable under the rubric of capitalism.

Aiming to unmask the material distinctions from the ideological functions behind so-called “cultural” differences, Selma James (2012) contends that the inner-class divisions are conditioned by capitalist organization, which is to say that the internal

dynamics of homophobia, racism, and sexism within the working class fundamentally benefit capital's continued accumulation (95). As stated in "Women and the Subversion of the Community," there is a structural and not contingent relationship between such systems of domination and capital's social organization. For James (2012), the "White left" claims that cultural differences, or identarian distinctions, should be worked out separately from class struggle, as if trying to think them through a class analytic creates confusion (95-96). But in fact, those very "cultural" differences which make material impacts in our daily lives are actually how a class is dis-unified, disorganized, but also reproduced. The very process of reproduction demanded by capital relies upon sexism, homophobia, and racism and then in turn reifies those logics of oppression. James argues that "[t]hese power relations within the working class weaken us in the power struggle between the classes. They are the particularized forms of indirect rule, one section of the class colonizing another and through capital imposing its will on us all" (James 2012, 96-97). From this view, the cultural differences which beget actual material differences in living conditions, divisions of labor, length and viability of life become recognized not as a struggle of one "culture" over another, but as a struggle of all exploited and dominated members of the "world proletariat" against the ruling classes (Federici 2020, 111). In this process, James and her comrades internationally hoped that taking class struggle out of the factory into the home would not make class struggle obsolete, but widen and multiply it.

In 1975, a group of Black women led by Margaret Prescod and Wilmette Brown created an autonomous group within the WfH global campaign entitled Black Women for Wages for Housework (BWfWfH). They were inspired both by the WfH political position and the immense government budget cuts to crucial social services in New York City during 1975. Excerpts of their literature are reprinted in Federici's collection and a (1980) Falling Wall Press pamphlet entitled *Black Women: Bringing it All Home* which reprints a speech Margaret Prescod gave during a 1977 WfH meeting. These sources show the particularity of Black women's reproductive struggles against the State and its determinant qualities of racism, surveillance, and sexual violence. In the inaugural issue of their journal, *Safire*, BWfWfH defends the rights of French sex workers on strike by rallying against their vilification for "demanding money for the work that all women are expected to do for free" (Federici 2017, 122). Unsurprisingly, this is not only a nuanced and pro-worker account of sex workers at a time when mainstream feminism was having so-called "Porn Wars" (Salucci, 2021), but also a link to the disproportionate exploitation of Black women's sexual labor during chattel slavery. The BWfWfH group become integral in identifying the ways in which Black and white women's sexual and domestic labor have historically been unequal, and the group emphasized the important racial dimensions to the struggle for Welfare Rights during the 1970s.

In a 1997 speech, Prescod highlights the figure of the mammy during chattel slavery and the double function of her labor to both secure the reproduction of the master and his white family, while also using this position of proximity to pilfer the masters' resources and struggle against the very reproductive work being imposed. Using examples of the mammy "taking wages" from her master in the form of food, clothing, or books to help educate herself and other slaves, Prescod (1980) contends that "we can

see that within the housework of the Black woman in the time of slavery two things were going on: the utilization of that woman to reproduce the master and his family, and at the same time that woman making a struggle against that work, to destroy that work” (16). The service of so-called sexual favors is also central to Prescod’s analysis of all the different sites at which the mammy’s reproductive labor is exploited, even “[...] labor is exploited, even after the formal abolition [...]” after the formal abolition of slavery in the West Indies (16). She then powerfully argues that the reproductive labor which was forced upon the mammy was used as the basis for an incredible accumulation of wealth in the U.S., concluding that Black women in particular are owed a remuneration for the generations of their unfree and coerced labor, both agricultural and reproductive.

#### **V. Congruencies, Discontinuities, and a Radical Re-reading of Mutual Aid**

The double function of the Black woman’s labor during chattel slavery denotes an important structural element to reproductive or care labor in general. The ambiguity of reproductive labor, that is its both generative and restrictive features, can make it a site of both resistance and domination. If one is interested in mobilizing reproductive labor within a larger emancipatory politics to create care work as a site of anti-capitalist struggle, how can we tell when survival is oppositional to capital and when it is compliant? This question orients the final section of this paper, which seeks to integrate the insights offered from the WfH and BPP histories of struggle toward an analysis of the proliferation of mutual aid projects during COVID-19. Both of these movements offered a clear evaluation that the wider social conditions under racialized and patriarchal capitalism were the causes of their suffering while simultaneously politicizing everyday efforts to survive. During COVID-19, efforts to survive became increasingly difficult and as a response practices of mutual aid emerged, including food and clothing drives, grocery deliveries, community fundraising for bills or rent on the internet using Venmo, CashApp, or GoFundMe, and many other online platforms. It would be impractical to attempt to survey all these practices in detail. Instead, I focus on the seemingly organic and non-governmental organizations which were created largely from online communities such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Through referral to a brief study done on thirty-two mutual aid organizers who used these methods in the United Kingdom during the height of the COVID-19 governmental lockdown orders, and Dean Spade’s book (2020), *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (And the Next)*, I consider the value of mutual aid as an organizing strategy for a radical politics of care.

Dean Spade is an organizer, academic, and lawyer whose lifework has been dedicated to building a movement for “queer and trans liberation based in racial and economic justice” (Spade, 2021). As a committed abolitionist and anarchist, he has been deeply involved in anti-racist prison activism which includes collaboration with Critical Resistance, an organization working to facilitate political organizing inside and outside the prison walls. Spade is committed to anti-capitalist and anti-colonial organizing as a foundational aspect of community members meeting unmet needs. While the book builds upon previously published work, it specifically caters to the increased development of such networks in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Spade argues that mutual aid both meets unmet needs while mobilizing people to fight back

against the social and political conditions which create and perpetuate such dangerous living environments. Spade (2020) claims that, “[g]etting support at a place that sees the systems, not the people suffering in them, as the problem can help people move from shame to anger and defiance. Mutual aid exposes the failures of the current system and shows an alternative” (13). He is clear that the target of the mutual aid organizer is not the individual in need, but instead the systems of domination which maintain untenable living and working conditions (12). Spade argues that community members engaged in mutual aid are able to reject the liberal charity model through which individuals are evaluated as worthy or unworthy of assistance (47–38).

The emphasis on the institutions which create and sustain unsafe living and working conditions for a large portion of the world’s population makes mutual aid an integral part of revolutionary resistance for Spade. Moving people out of the shroud of shame caused by increased precarity also means moving them from a feeling of isolation to a feeling of mutual recognition or collectivity. Even though Spade sees mutual aid as one tactic among many that we can use to combat these systems of exploitation and domination, he finds it to be a particularly useful tactic because it “brings people into coordinated actions *right now*” (42). Some textual examples of strong mutual aid programs include Mutual Aid Disaster Relief which sought to provide mutual aid to Puerto Rico after 2018 Hurricane Maria and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project which provides free legal advice to trans and gender nonconforming people (Spade 2020, 18). The urgency and practicality of getting the resources to people immediately helps to combat “the false separation of politics and injustice from ordinary life” (27).

In the article (2021) “More Than a COVID-19 Response: Sustaining Mutual Aid Groups During and Beyond the Pandemic” in *Frontiers in Psychology*, Maria Fernandes-Jesus et al. interviewed thirty-two organizers about their experiences creating mutual aid projects during the pandemic. These interviews took place over several months with interviewees from England, Wales, Scotland, and North Ireland. Overall, the authors found the following themes most common among the interviewees: a sense of community-building through meeting localized needs over time, building trust through connections to individual and collective organizations, and collective coping strategies which lead to feelings of hope and efficacy (Fernandes-Jesus, et al 2021, 6). Noting that creating trust between the mutual aid group and the community was essential, the authors report that generally there were no criteria of eligibility needed in order to request aid. The authors define this as operating in what Spade calls the “solidarity and not charity” model (8). Even though the participants reported a high hourly commitment – one participant stating to have organized seven days a week for six weeks straight – they also reported a sense of shared identity and supported other organizers with coping strategies (9). There were both positive and negative reviews from participants about working with local governmental institutions. Though the authors highlight the anarchist roots of mutual aid through reference to Spade and Peter Kropotkin, there was no mention of shared political perspective or analyses from the interviews.

It is clear that some of the community projects which Spade calls mutual aid, most notably the Free Breakfast for Children program by the BPP, did actively reject the larger social conditions which produced abject poverty in Black neighborhoods.

Simultaneously, the BPP identified the United States government and its logic of white supremacy as the perpetrators of violence and harm instead of the suffering populations. However, in this brief review of COVID-19 mutual aid efforts in the U.K., it is less clear to me that organizers used a shared political analysis as that from which to base and perpetuate their projects of mutual aid. Even if some interviewees in “More than COVID-19” had radical political views, it was not enough to become highlighted in the results, nor did it seem that such views brought people to organizing. Most interviewees noted a general feeling of wanting to help those in need (11). The global crisis of COVID-19 demonstrated quite starkly the “disposability” of certain populations in the eyes of the economy and various nation-states, yet this was not explicitly stated by organizers as a motivating factor for their efforts. Some limitations that the authors identify include that “it was particularly difficult to reach politicized groups and groups working in deprived and marginalized areas” (Fernandes-Jesus, et al 2021, 14). While I would concede that mutual aid does bring people into action right now, it does not in all instances produce a shared political analysis which could orient participants toward future endeavors.

Why is shared political analysis so important? In the study referenced above, good-hearted people came together and found community in each other during difficult and isolating times. This, in and of itself, is an individually replenishing and helpful survival strategy; however, without a shared political analysis which understands the intersectional dynamics that produce and exacerbate such crises in the first place, then mere survival will end up supporting capital instead of opposing it. Survival cannot be an individualized moment of moral achievement. I argue that past historical movements which politicized human survival and caring labor, such as the BPP and the WfH campaign, demonstrate this clearly since both movements framed survival as a collective and oppositional effort. Consequently, the very task of surviving became itself a political act. It is imperative to learn from the anti-capitalist struggles of the past in order to forge a way toward a liberatory future. In uplifting survival without a robust feminist and anti-racist class politic, one produces a politic of care that, ultimately, does the work the State refuses to do: namely, reproduce and attend the unmet bodily and psychological needs of the laboring classes. This work is done not in the name of revolution, but through the framework of individual good will. I find that mutual aid could have the potential that Spade identifies in his work, but without a thorough analysis of each mutual aid group’s political grounding it may actually work more for the State than against it.

In closing, I suggest that a radical politic of community care able to oppose the avoidable death and harm from COVID-19 must be joined with attempts to create autonomous infrastructure which not only secures survival, but builds political consciousness through radical care work. This can look like passing out groceries after de-escalation trainings; free first-aid training with a brief lesson about global anti-capitalist struggle; free or barter-based childcare collectives in your neighborhood; refusal to do unpaid emotional labor for your boss. These individual practices need to be processed collectively and might offer more potential for developing political consciousness than redistributing scant resources. COVID-19 mutual aid can become transactional when a one-time donation puts little emphasis on the very conditions which produce suffering,

yet still affords the donator a sense of moral righteousness. It is not enough to care for each other out of internal moral obligations. In order to combat the gendered, sexual, and racial divisions of care labor, the very conditions of such work must be rejected. Militancy and confrontation to capital cannot only happen in the streets through public demonstration. It is no longer acceptable to refuse to include caring labor as a part of revolutionary politics. Protest and care work can and should be two parts of the same process which seek to confront capital directly and refuse to do its bidding. In re-amplifying the need for a radical politics of care over and against current mutual aid efforts to combat the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on the world's workers, paid and unpaid, I revisit histories of anti-racist and feminist struggle to learn the most vital lessons about how to radically reshape our survival and ensure the future of our liberation struggles.

## Notes

**1** From this point forward, the Black Panther Party will be referred to as BPP or the Party, while the Wages for Housework campaign will be signified by the WfH acronym.

**2** In this section in particular, I pay homage to the radical spirit of both Jackson and Assata by the purposeful misspelling of America to "Amerika" which can be found in both texts being reviewed here. This a rhetorical strategy aimed at illuminating the full breadth of the brutal and bloody history of white supremacy propagated by the U.S. state and its human safeguards. As noted in my reading of Assata, truly powerful political consciousness demands a persistent historical contextualization and this misspelling is my attempt to meet her demand within my own analysis.

**3** There seems to be some recent dispute over the original authors of this prolific essay, as both James and Dalla Costa had written about in their recent collected volumes. Given that I cannot parse which thinker has the most correct account of events, I have cited both of them as the authors in part to credit them both equally. There is generous use of the first-person plural perspective, as the pronoun "we" is peppered throughout the essay; by citing both authors, I hope to lend legitimacy to both women as central forces within the international WfH campaign, regardless of any subsequent political disputes.

**4** This hotly debated topic within the disparate theoretical accounts which could be called social reproduction feminisms is not a clear cut issue; however, I tend to disagree with the claim that all unwaged reproductive labor directly produces surplus value. And yet, it can be especially difficult to tease out this question with the growing commodification of reproductive activities and the increased tendency for upper class women in the global north to outsource their housework to lower class women in the capitalist periphery. Additionally, people such as a Tithi Bhattacharya argue for an abundant notion of the social reproduction which includes such public institutions as education and healthcare. In such an account, certain groups of waged workers would also be contributing to the overall reproduction of the working and capitalist classes, and as well as to the production of surplus value for capital because their work is waged. Therefore, it is not quite correct to say reproductive labor never yields surplus value, but the question demands detailed contextualization given exactly what kind of reproductive labor is under investigation and the various forms that labor make take.

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