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**Jezebel By Another Name: Black Women, Carceral Geography, and the Practice of  
Urban Marronage in Chicago**

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**Jezebel By Another Name: Black Women, Carceral Geography, and the Practice of  
Urban Marronage in Chicago**

**by**

**Michaela Machicote**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation firstly to my grandmother Catherine Lee Roby, who made the journey North. I also dedicate this to Rekiya Boyd, Marcie Gerald, and all the Black women (Queer, Trans, Cis), femmes, and girls of Chicago.

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## **Abstract**

### **Jezebel By Another Name: Black Women, Carceral Geography, and the Practice of Urban Marronage in Chicago**

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“Jezebel By Another Name: Black Women, Carceral Geography, and the Practice of Urban Marronage in Chicago,” examines how Black women (including Black/Afro Latinas), femmes, and non-men in Chicago navigate the carceral, anti-black landscape created by neoliberal approaches to “law and order.” Recognizing that there are multiple sites where Black women are most vulnerable in the city, this project focuses specifically on sex work and community organizing. I argue that there is a dialectic between these two spaces, as spaces of violence and spaces of radical possibility. As such, this dissertation examines Black spatial practices of performance, art, politics, and community healing as contemporary forms of marronage in the afterlife of slavery, which I term *urban marronage*. Incorporating an interdisciplinary use of Black feminist geography and Black feminist ethnographic methodologies, this dissertation knits together the stories of Black women who have been violated by the state and Black women organizing against state violence on the West and South Sides of Chicago. I chronicle how these women are hyper-policed, criminalized, and territorially bound by racialized, gendered, and sexualized

discourses of citizenship. This includes an analysis of anti-sex work ordinances and Black women's precarity. City laws limit the possibilities of Black women's citizenship by limiting their rights to the city (freedom of movement, access to public space), "criminalizing" all Black women as potential sex workers, and marking Black women as violable (not only by the police but also by society generally). To counter this criminalization, Black women create spaces to celebrate, support and empower Black communities as a form of urban marronage: a Black, queer, feminist, anti-violence organizing practice of creative imagining and refuge-building. Black women are criminalized and queered by the state regardless of their personal histories, class differences, and societal positions. Consequently, a Black queer feminist organizing praxis is necessary for diagnosing and addressing the landscape of gendered, antiblack violence.



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## **Introduction**

I met Elizabeth Gerald in 2017 while we both sat in the dark with our children in the common area of “the Breathing Room”—an old two-story home repurposed as an activist space. This took place a few days before the Let Us Breathe Collective, in collaboration with Black Lives Matter Chicago, Assata’s Daughters, and A Long Walk Home, held an event called “Black Marvels: A Celebration of Marcie Gerald and Black Girl Resilience.” The event was designed to honor participatory Black women, femmes, and girls. Elizabeth Gerald's daughter Marcie committed suicide after the state failed to protect young Marcie from intimidation in the courtroom, creating an atmosphere that left her feeling unsafe and victimized every time she was forced to face her rapist. This led to her eventual suicide. Marcie's story reveals how the patriarchal, white supremacist structure of the state goes beyond failing to protect Black women and girls but rather refuses to protect us.

Marcie Gerald was fourteen years old and walking home from the library in January of 2014 when a newly released violent offender raped her. The trauma of facing her rapist in court made Marcie feel assaulted all over again. He taunted her by winking suggestively at her, threatened to send gang members to harm her and her family, blamed the rape on her beauty, and showed no remorse for his crime. One year, later, after instances of cutting and other suicide attempts, Marcie overdosed on the medication given

to her to help with the inflammation and pain she experienced in her ovaries after the assault. She told her mother she loved her, laid in the bed next to her and did not awake in the morning.

By tirelessly supporting others, Elizabeth and her family have been healing their trauma of losing Marcie and empowering themselves to love and assist others in the community by bringing awareness to the reality of trauma, suicide, and sexual assault in the Black community. July 20<sup>th</sup> marked the second anniversary of 15-year-old Marcie J. Gerald's passing. This was also the day her mother, Elizabeth Gerald, and her other four children were forced out of their rental home in Flossmoor, IL, a suburb of Cook County. Their landlord neglected to fix their basement after extreme flooding. As a result, the house developed black mold and became uninhabitable. Neither the landlord nor state agencies provided any assistance or resources for emergency housing. The apartment was not up to code by Illinois's tenant-landlord ordinance. By law, the landlord should have addressed the problem within the first 14 days. However, Elizabeth Gerald was told to call the Red Cross and FEMA, but neither program had available space or resources. Elizabeth Gerald and her children had to uproot themselves, destabilizing an already precarious home life, especially for her child with special needs. Black Lives Matter Chicago collaborated with the Let Us Breathe Collective to provide them with a short-term place to stay (the "Breathing Room"), along with beds, toiletries, and food.

Elizabeth and Marcie Gerald's stories demonstrate a scenario of cruel irony in the carceral urban space of Chicago: although Black women and girls live under the constant

threat of violence, the state fails to protect us. More cruelly yet, the state criminalizes us and refuses to protect us. Instead of treating Black women as victims of violence, the urban carceral sphere normalizes violence against Black women by reinscribing Black women and girls as deviant and violable. However, faced with this reality, Black queer feminist organizers create spaces of refuge to shield Black women and girls from violence and allow them to heal (if only temporarily); what I term urban marronage.

Black girls' experiences with the carceral state are often ignored, erased, and overshadowed by the masculinist discourses of urban violence that focus on gang violence and police violence. I do not write about Marcie's experience with the state to, "provoke recognition of [Marcie's] humanity and outrage over the vicious institution" (Hartman 1997). This often blurs the lines between witness and spectator, reproducing the spectacle of Black suffering. I highlight Marcie Gerald's tragic experience in order to illuminate how violence is multivalent; at times it is explicit and clearly recognizable, like Marcie's rape, and at times it is unrecognizable/difficult to discern in what is considered the mundane or quotidian, like Elizabeth Gerald's displacement from the flood. For Black women and girls, experiences of explicit, physical violence are often intertwined with the subtle and unrecognizable. The terror lies in the multiple layers of violence entangled throughout Marcie and Elizabeth's experiences with the carceral state-- the palimpsestic embodiment<sup>1</sup> brought on by state and urban violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I draw on Christen Smith's (2016) definition of *palimpsestic embodiment*. According to Smith, "the body is a repository of temporal and spatial information" (165); specifically, the body is "overlain by layers of violent reenactment, and the faint shadows of the text ... are the temporal accumulation of knowledge ... that remain embedded in the body and retained in our corporeal memory" (165).

The carceral legal system and society writ-large construct, reinforce, and require gendered and sexualized Black deviance<sup>2</sup> to sustain the neoliberal project of punitive social control in the name of “law and order.” For Black women, this has tangible, life-threatening consequences. We are hypersexualized, criminalized and our movements throughout urban-carceral spaces, like Chicago, are restricted by a constant specter of violence (like Marcie Gerald's haunting by her rapist). Ironically, however, while we exist under the shadow of the threat of violence, we are also refused protection by the state and society because we are marked as deviant and explicitly or implicitly deserving of the violence we receive. Just as society and the state construct Black women as deviant and undeserving of protection, Black women also *experience* violence at alarming rates. This matrix of violence<sup>3</sup> -- which is constant and on multiple registers (i.e., interpersonal, physical, structural, spatial and symbolic)--not only structures the cityscape, but also determines Black women's access to citizenship and the city itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in the relationship between sex work ordinances, the criminalization of Black women's bodies, and the restriction of our movements.

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<sup>2</sup> Here I engage with Cathy Cohen's 2004 article, “Deviance as Resistance.” Cohen uses queer theory and Black feminist analysis centered around the experiences of the most marginalized at the intersections of race, gender, class, heteronormativity, and ability to highlight the “construction and malleability of categories” around identity and social belonging. Cohen examines the ways that repetitive “intentionally deviant” (social non-compliance and refusal to adapt) practices by multiple individuals, new identities, communities and politics might emerge and create spaces of resistance and counterpublics.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the term “Matrix of Violence” from Patricia Hill Collins term “matrix of domination” in her 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought* as she illuminates the multiple systems of harm and ways Black women experience violence and Beth Richie's analysis of “Male Violence Matrix” in her 2012 *Arrested Justice: Black women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation*, where Richie gives a feminist analysis on the context of male violence against Black women to highlight the various ways Black women's social location makes them susceptible to the various forms of violence the state perpetuates .

Black women's access to resources, ability to move freely through the city, and the quality of our everyday lives and the lives of our children, are all defined by gendered, racialized policing practices exercised through the state's apparatus. Through a critical analysis of policing Black women in the city of Chicago and Black queer feminist organizing against this policing, this dissertation argues that: 1) policing in Chicago creates a racialized, sexualized, and gendered carceral landscape that uniquely impacts Black women and femmes, and; 2) only an intersectional, multidimensional, coalition-based approach to systemic inequalities (and other violence perpetuated by the state) can attend to the multifaceted, multi-generational needs and traumas of Black women<sup>4</sup> harmed by the state. Through ethnography, legal, content and historical analysis, I examine the history of racialized, gendered, and sexualized policing in Chicago and Black women's responses to this policing. Black women engage in Black, queer, feminist praxes of coalition and solidarity building to redress and combat the multivalent dimensions of state violence and create safe spaces for Black women to live, breathe, and organize politically: This constitutes, what I call, "urban marronage."

Urban marronage is the contemporary creation of spaces (temporary or permanent) of resistance against state violence and its carceral, necropolitical logics within the urban landscape. The primary function of these spaces varies according to the needs, desires, and imaginations of the Black women and femmes who create them. This dissertation focuses on Black spatial practices of performance, art, politics, and community building and

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<sup>4</sup> The use of the term "Black women" throughout this dissertation includes Black trans women, Black and Afro-Latinas, as well as nonbinary individuals who are femme and identify with the term woman.

healing that occur in these urban marronage spaces. Alongside this, I examine Black women and girls' political agency through their ability to transform their relationship to the city figuratively and literally through "homemaking."<sup>5</sup>

The foci of this dissertation are sex work and community organizing. Over a period of 13 months, over three years (2017-2019), I conducted ethnographic research in Chicago with the Let Us Breathe Collective (LUB), the Sex Worker Outreach Project of Chicago (SWOP), the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP 100), Assata's Daughters, and Good Kids Mad City (GKMC). While working with the Let Us Breathe Collective, I helped renovate the house they use as a communal space for the neighborhood and other organizations. I aided in grant writing for the collective. I participated in member training and de-escalation training. I also helped with the community garden and food distribution. While working with the Sex Worker Outreach Project, I attended member training for outreach that involved instruction on serving populations suffering from drug addiction and interacting with police. I attended and participated in community meetings centered on survivors of police violence and provided local resources for those who attended. Every Tuesday, I participated in outreach with SWOP in the East Garfield Park area (predominantly Black neighborhood) and Boys Town (historically white and queer, with a sizeable houseless population that is primarily people of color). We passed out housing, addiction, and sex worker resources to those who approached us. As part of SWOP's commitment to not criminalizing addiction, we also provided clean needles, a sharps box, and prophylactics.

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<sup>5</sup> Zenzele Isoke (2013) *Urban Black Women and the Politics of Resistance*; and (2011) *The politics of homemaking: Black feminist transformations of a cityscape*.

As I worked with SWOP in both locations, I started conversations with the people who frequented our table. One Black woman named Harriet, who was experiencing houselessness, held a long conversation with me about how people looked at her as if she either didn't exist or was a nuisance. Homelessness is just one of the ways in which Black women feel "hyper(in)visible"--invisible yet hypervisible<sup>6</sup>. They are ignored and unheard. I also draw upon my own personal experiences with violence in Chicago as an Afro-Puerto Rican and African American mother and graduate student who is a third generation Chicagoan (I elaborate on my positionality and how it informs my research in the methodology section).

While these are just a few of over 200 groups in Chicago that focus on some aspect of urban and state violence in Chicago, these are the groups I have engaged with the most. These organizations (excluding Black Lives Matter and SWOP) used a Black queer feminist praxis to serve the community and challenge the state. The interlocutors presented in this dissertation exist within an intermeshed range of social locations that cover various genres and disciplines and fall into activist, scholar, and artist categories. During this time, I also conducted in-depth life history interviews with 13 Black women about their experiences with violence, poverty, sex work, and organizing in Chicago. I witnessed

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<sup>6</sup> Jenn Jackson's piece on "Whiteness, Groceries, and Black Women's (Hyper)(In)Visibility" refers to the notion of being seen and "being treated differently because of [one's] body and the perception of [one's] utility to serve whiteness."

Olivia Cole also references this state of being for Black children in her article "McKinney, Texas and the Hypervisible Invisibility of Black Children," where she talks about racial disparities in the treatment of school children by authority figures. Here, I mean hyper(in)visibility as the difference in treatment due to race, gender, class, *and* the perception of one's utility to serve whiteness.



community testimonials against police brutality and participated in community workshops that explored trauma and resilience in women of color. Using the information I gathered during this field research, I aim to fill in the gaps in the totality of violence experienced by Black women in Chicago from the state to the local (macro to micro) level. I also emphasize how coalition-based approaches effectively address intersectional experiences with state violence.

There is a dialectical relationship between sex work as an epistemological space of deviance and community organizing as an oppositional space that pushes back against the state. This dialectic simultaneously marks both spaces of violence and spaces of radical possibility. Sex work and sex worker activism provide insight into the connections between the criminalization of Black women, access to public space/the right to the city, police violence and state neglect, and citizenship. The experiences of Black women, girls, and femmes demonstrate that regardless of social location, under the Chicago legal system, Black women are always explicitly or implicitly read by the state as sex workers and therefore deviant, criminal, and in need of policing. Due to this pervasive cognitive association, sex work is the literal and metaphorical space that defines Black women's place within the city, and the ranges of possibilities afforded to us. Consequently, any reading of Black women's experiences with violence in Chicago—in all of its forms—must also, by extension, consider sex work as a lived experience and social imaginary that shapes the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and policing in the city. In turn, understanding sex work as an epistemological frame also allows us to understand the limits and possibilities of community organizing against violence against Black women.

Too often, the scope of exploration of how Black women experience violence is small, and this myopic approach misses or ignores the ways that different types of violence cannot be separated from one another. I seek to demonstrate that Black women's activism is not solely directed to one act, time, or place of violence, but rather toward a process of violence that is ongoing and cumulative. Black women must employ an intersectional approach to combat violence that is multidimensional by nature, constant, and epiphenomenal. Depending on the circumstances, the individual, and the trajectory of violence, Black women cannot employ just one method of combating violence.

In this project, I draw on Black feminist geography and Black feminist ethnography to knit together the stories of Black women who have been violated by the state with the stories of Black women organizing against state violence on the West and South Sides of Chicago. I chronicle how Black women and femmes are hyper-policed, criminalized, and territorially bound by racialized, gendered, and sexualized discourses of citizenship. The dissertation is two-pronged. On the one hand, I study the landscape of violence against Black women in Chicago through an analysis of sex work ordinances in the city. This work demonstrates how city laws limit the possibilities of Black women's citizenship by limiting our rights to the city (freedom of movement, access to public space), "criminalizing" all Black women as potential sex workers, and marking Black women as violable (not only by police but also by men generally). I argue that Black women are criminalized and queered by the state regardless of our personal histories, class differences, and societal positions. Consequently, a Black queer feminist organizing praxis is necessary for diagnosing and

addressing the landscape of gendered, antiblack violence. This introduces the second prong of the project: a chronicle of Black queer feminists organizing against violence in Chicago.

Black women and femmes in Chicago are hypersexualized, criminalized, and policed daily. As a result, we experience a matrix of violence from the structural to the interpersonal. Some Black women mobilize to combat this violence despite having limited resources and lacking the support of public opinion. Our stories are rarely foregrounded in the narrative of racialized state violence, yet this is changing. From #SayHerName to #MeToo, Black women's experiences with physical and sexual violence are beginning to garner increased visibility.

Prior to 2010, academic literature on Chicago and violence focused primarily on masculinist discourses of violence in the urban context. Sociologists and anthropologists have written accounts of Chicago that focus on gang violence, police shootings, and the Prison Industrial Complex as they affect young and adult Black men (Venkatesh 2008; Burgois 1996). This focus has sensationalized US urban violence so much so that some Latin American sociologists have come to understand violence in the US urban context reductively as simply retaliatory in nature.<sup>7</sup> Since 2010 there has been a shift in the public discourse on Blackness and urban violence to focus on the ways Black women and girls are also affected by violence: domestic violence, sexual violence, violence within medical care, welfare, police violence, criminalization, poverty, and the violence that comes from trauma (e.g., Ritchie 2012, Ritchie 2017; Cox 2015; Caron 2011).

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<sup>7</sup> Auyero and Berti 2015 argue that violence “in the ghetto” is retaliatory in nature.

Beth Richie's (2015) *Arrested Justice: Black women, Violence, and America's Prison*, provides an ethnographically rich, feminist analysis on male violence to highlight the various ways Black women's social location makes them susceptible to the various forms of violence the state perpetuates. Andrea Ritchie's (2017) *Invisible No more: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* gives an overview of the various ways queer, cis, and trans, poor women of color are vulnerable to state violence (especially policing) and mass incarceration. Keisha-Khan Perry's (2013) *Black Women Against the Land Grab* adds a transnational framework to this discussion by examining Black women's resistance to urban renewal and gentrification in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Erica William's (2013) *Sex Tourism in Bahia: Ambiguous Entanglements* examines the way sex tourism in Bahia exacerbates the hypersexualization of Black women in Salvador da Bahia (a Black state) regardless of social class or citizenship, marking Black women as sexually available and putting them at-risk for violent encounters with police and tourists.

This dissertation disrupts masculinist approaches to race and urban violence by critically analyzing how the Black urban experience has been shaped by violent colonial processes that are inherently *gendered* as well as *raced* (Carby 1992). In doing so, this project expands common conceptions of violence to consider how multiple forms of violence function and have varying social impacts on different people according to social context and identity politics.

The women and femmes that I worked with and witnessed held an understanding of decolonization that centered on transformative justice and healing—whether that be physically, mentally, spiritually or a combination of all three. They also, as in the case of

Let Us Breathe and B.Y.P. 100, centered a Black queer feminist praxis that does not center cishet male leaders. This politic sits in opposition to the dominate discourse of Black politics (vis-à-vis Black politicians) in Chicago.

Black liberation provokes white anxieties and fears. White people historically fear that they will be replaced, only to then become oppressed. As a result, law enforcement and civilians mete out deeply political violence that manifests through laws regulating the movement of Black and queer(ed) bodies as well as mundane, everyday antiblack violence. Situating Black politicians within this logic representational politics is a site where politicians reproduce similar violence through paternalistic rhetoric and punitive practices that will be explored later on in the dissertation. The work of the Black women and femmes in my dissertation allows us to see and recognize these harms.

I engage with Saidiya Hartman's (1997) *Scenes of Subjection* and her archival analysis of violence and power in slavery to better understanding the relationship between violence, power and antiblackness. Broadly speaking, Hartman critiques slavery and freedom as a false dichotomy and discusses their relationship to racial and gendered domination and Black subjectivity. Hartman argues that there is a tragic continuity in the constitutions of Blackness created through the institution of Chattel Slavery in nineteenth-century America. Therefore, the range of liberal, anti-slavery, and reform discourses that were used to promote progressive causes actually facilitated violent, symbolic forms of domination. By focusing on quotidian practices of violence and resistance, she demonstrates how mundane acts of violence have served the interest of racial and sexual

domination. Hartman problematizes using (and overusing) the violence of the spectacle as the primary lens through which to understand this domination.

Hartman uses the example of an enslaved person performing for their enslaver to demonstrate how “[t]hese ‘gentler forms’ extended and maintained the relations of domination through euphemism and concealment. Innocent amusements constituted a form of symbolic violence—that is, a ‘form of domination which is exercised through the communication in which it is disguised’” (42). She goes on to assert that “[b]y disassembling the ‘benign’ scene, we confront the everyday practice of domination, the nonevent, as it were” (42). Like Hartman, I am interested in the quotidian, mundane violence of the “nonevent” that this dissertation examines, from everyday interpersonal experiences with antiblackness to laws and social attitudes that limit the ability of Black/queer women to occupy public space freely.

One such example of the quotidian violence discussed in this dissertation revolves around Black women, girls, and femmes’ right to the city, necessitating the practice of urban marronage.” Black and Brown<sup>8</sup> activists, and specifically Black (queer) women, enact “a set of oppositional spatial practices” (Isoke 2013) to resist the intersectional effects of misogyny, homo/transphobia, racism, poverty, and state violence in some of the most violence-ridden areas of the United States (Isoke 2014; Cox 2015; Ritchie 2017). This has been done through events and protests that take various forms such as occupying spaces

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<sup>8</sup> Due to the limits of language in describing and understanding identities that are tied to race, place, and politics, I use the term “Black and Brown” to talk about Blackness beyond the African American context, as well as to speak to the fact that the homogenization of groups from Latin America under the umbrella terms “Hispanic,” and “Latino, a,e,x” do not capture the racial nuances within these groups. Brown here indicates those of Latin American descent who do not identify as Black or white.

where Black women, girls, and femmes have traditionally faced violence, in effect changing the symbolic nature and their relationship to the space. This spatial resistance is one of the many ways grassroots activists are drawing attention to the fact that Black women are often minimized as both direct and indirect victims of violence (Richie 2012; Smith 2016; Ritchie 2017; Brown et al., 2017; Randsby 2018; Jackson 2019; Threadcraft 2021). As Michelle S. Jacobs (2017) explains, “Black women have a very specific history with the state and law enforcement that is not replicated among other women’s communities” and Black women’s relationship to the state, particularly through the police, is “marked by violence” (41).

Black women are often reduced to witness or bystander, mother, sister, or partner of a male victim of state-sponsored violence. As a result, this erases both their experiences of violence and the agency exercised by Black women who create spaces of marronage to foster community, heal, and mobilize their social capital to resist the ever-increasing state-sponsored violence plaguing their communities. Through a series of ethnographic vignettes, Beth Ritchie (2012) makes a feminist analysis of male violence to highlight the many ways Black women’s social location makes them susceptible to the various forms of violence the state perpetuates, particularly police violence against Black women. Andrea Ritchie (2017) gives a broad overview of the ways cis and trans women of color are vulnerable to state violence and mass incarceration, drawing the public’s attention to the killings, assaults, and rapes committed by police against women of color. Christen Smith’s (2021) article, “Counting Frequency,” thinks through the transnational dimensions of police terror against Black women, specifically how police violence stretches time and

space as it ungenders Black women and denies their humanity. The notion of sequelae as a new form of arithmetic to measure the effects of state violence is especially useful in Chicago, a city known for the police torture and disappearances of its Black citizens.

From the creation of impoverished urban areas (termed “Ghettos,” “*caserios*,” “*banlieues*,” and “*favelas*”), white flight, and hyper-segregation, to the divestment of community resources such as schools, jobs, and community centers, urban spaces and the bodies that inhabit them have been racialized and gendered by the state. Keisha-Khan Perry (2014) adds yet another transnational lens to this discussion by examining Black women’s resistance to urban renewal and gentrification in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Perry demonstrates how increased visibility of the neighborhood of Gamboa de Baixo as a target of urban removal, and as they organize politically and collectively to fight expulsion, has made it susceptible to increased policing, and as a result, police abuse. This Black-women-led struggle for citizenship necessitates an urgent demand for racial inclusion in development discourses and practices, along with imagining and implementing urban grassroots antiracism strategies, such as fighting police abuse.

Within these spaces, residents and activists theorize their experiences with violence and constantly make the connection between state violence and urban violence. For example, Miriam Kaba’s abolition work with Project NIA, a grassroots organization with a vision to end youth incarceration, and the organizations and projects she co-founded over the years including We Charge Genocide, the Chicago Freedom School, the Chicago Taskforce on Violence against Girls and Young Women, Love & Protect and most recently Survived & Punished, all demonstrate the urgent need for racial, gender, and transformative



justice that centers the needs of marginalized communities and does not rely on carceral logics. Claire Hancock, Sophie Blanchard, and Amandine Chapuis' (2018) article "*Banlieusard.e.s* claiming a right to the City of Light: Gendered violence and spatial politics in Paris" engages with Henri Lefebvre's theorization of the right to the city, citizenship, through a gendered and racialized analysis of the inhabitants in a Paris ghetto. Specifically, their analysis of how Muslims and women of color stake spatial claims in the city and how they experience police violence is of particular interest. These residents understand how urban violence is overdetermined, particularly by how it is equated with male gang violence. Gendered assumptions about the nature of urban violence obscure the dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Black women in Chicago acutely suffer from structural violence that resonates with these global contexts. I demonstrate this in this dissertation through my interviews with residents and stories like that of Marcie Gerald and Elizabeth Gerald.

Black women and girls, femmes, and nonmen are spearheading these organizations and movements as a direct response to what they see as the state's inability to address the violence it creates for these communities. These women understand that because of their race, gender identity, ability, and class, they face unique violence rooted in misogynoir (Bailey 2013) that the state either cannot or will not address. After spending three consecutive summers (the final year of observation beginning January 2019 and ending August 2019) interviewing women on the South and West sides of Chicago, working with various grassroots organizations such as Let Us Breathe, Assata's Daughters, and BYP 100, sitting in courthouses, meetings, and events, what became apparent was Black

women's frustrations with their constant erasure from narratives of state violence against Black communities. The erasure of Black women along with the tendency to collapse Black men and women so that "men" stands for the whole of the community ignores the unique types of violence Black women face. Black women voiced that any institution that was not created for or by Black women to address the ongoing violence and trauma in the Black community has not served them holistically.

### Disrupting the Male Violence Narrative of Chicago

There is often the narrative that Black people in Chicago do not understand the nature of their condition.<sup>9</sup> My conversations with Chicagoans during my field research in the summers of 2017 and 2018 demonstrate the opposite. Black (and Brown) Chicagoans know exactly why there is violence and poverty in our neighborhoods because we possess *situated knowledge*.<sup>10</sup> Situated knowledge is the knowledge that Black women possess due to our positionality by race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, etc., a knowledge that is marked by the fact that it is opposed so fiercely by everything surrounding it. It reinstates Black people as producers of knowledge—experts on their condition (Collins 1990). This

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, O. (1959). *Five families; Mexican case studies in the culture of poverty*. New York: Basic Books. Many policymakers have taken up this text, along with the report on "Negro Families" (Moynihan 1965), to explain the pathology of Black poverty and violence due to patriarchy and cultural predisposition instead of a result of intentional structural discrimination toward Black people.

<sup>10</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, And The Politics Of Empowerment*. Boston : Unwin Hyman, 1990. Print.

knowledge is often challenged in the media, questioned by the court of public opinion, and vaguely mentioned by scholars writing on violence in Chicago.

In certain neighborhoods on the West and South Sides of Chicago, there are more police cameras on street corners than there are actual traffic lights, and police often walk the blocks in pairs<sup>11</sup>. This hyper-surveillance is part of the city's larger structure of racialized, classed, and gendered state violence. City officials call Chicago “Chiraq,” comparing the city to Afghanistan and Iraq. As locals, we reject this name. The term marks us racially, culturally, and socially as criminals, erasing us as a dynamic community of political *subjects*<sup>12</sup> who fight against the conditions of violence and gendered, racialized, and classed injustices, like police brutality. In recent years, popular discourse on urban violence (especially in Chicago) has reductively used the term “black-on-black” crime to frame crime rates in predominantly Black areas. Most of what Americans know about crime and justice is influenced by popular media (Surette 1998). Not only is this term simplistic and emotionally charged, but it is also problematic when political commentators, politicians, and law enforcement agencies use it to obfuscate how and why crime happens. The media can also “distort crime and justice issues by constructing attitudes and perceptions that do not match the reality of contemporary crime problems” by focusing on things such as gun homicides in urban areas with no contextualization, leading viewers to believe Black communities are innately violent (Braga and Brunson 2015, 2).

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, T. (2018, May 26). Can 30,000 Cameras Help Solve Chicago’s Crime Problem? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/26/us/chicago-police-surveillance.html>

<sup>12</sup> Tianna S. Paschel’s book, *Becoming Black Political Subjects* (2016), is a comparative analysis of race making and political change in contemporary Brazil and Colombia.

Black communities in Chicago are not monolithic victims of an undeclared war. They are political agents who engage in coalition building and political organizing to oppose the structures of inequality that produce our communities as occupied zones. Although there are tensions within the Black community due to competition for scarce resources and housing in working-class Chicago<sup>13</sup>, the social justice legacy of radical Black organizing, exemplified by groups like the Black Panther Party and the Puerto Rican Young Lords, is currently being renewed in a new wave of youth-led social justice organizing. This organizing is a response to police brutality and anti-blackness. The narrative of all-out “gang warfare” elides the aggressive poverty, disenfranchisement, and residential segregation that animates this violence which goes unaddressed by those who create the policies that solidify these conditions. Local social movements against police brutality that demand social, political, and economic equality, frame these conditions in terms of structural violence; a pushback against reductionism, and stereotyping. Much of what is known about violence in the inner city has been sensationalized by both the media and the academy<sup>14</sup>. Here I give a brief overview of the literature on the topic. I expand this discussion in subsequent chapters.

Many ethnographies on urban areas like Chicago focus predominantly on (male-dominated) gang violence, although some U.S. Black scholars have also, occasionally,

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<sup>13</sup> The covid pandemic has exacerbated poverty in Chicago, resulting in increased rates of crime.

<sup>14</sup> Auyero et al 2015; Venkatesh 2008; Bourgois 2003 are sociologists and anthropologists that have written on the topics of gang violence in the United States. Their texts have sensationalized violence as “retaliatory” (Auyero et al 2015), and have tended to glamorize gang life in the case of Venkatesh.

challenged these perspectives.<sup>15</sup> Mainstream narratives either lack, ignore or trivialize an analysis of the divestment of these cities; the redlining that created the geographical boundaries; the interethnic conflict over industrial jobs that have since left the city; the political coalition during the 1960s and 1970s; the flooding of Black neighborhoods with drugs; and the murder of Black political leaders in these neighborhoods to destroy communities, advocating for social, political, and economic change.

I aim to steer clear of sensationalized gang narratives that only examine the effects of violence on men. Specifically, I hope to produce scholarship that goes beyond the narrative of the ghetto as an isolated space that exists separate from larger societal structures of power to show that, “the ills of the inner city are linked to the ills of a globalizing world” (Ralph 2014; 15). Dexter R. Voisin (2019) argues that structural violence leads to urban violence and trauma in Black youth. Focusing predominantly on the South Side of Chicago, his chapter “Not All Violence Is the Same: Race and Place-Based Violence,” features interviews and data to highlight how the sensationalization of violence by the media and public officials exacerbates that same violence. One quote from Voisin’s book highlights the trend in studying violence and trauma in Chicago, namely, the erasure of Black women and girls. His interviewee “Jenny,” a 29-year-old Black woman from Chicago states, “...Have you ever stopped to ask a young black female how police brutality affects them?” To which Voisin admits that he had not, until the day he interviewed Jenny (28). While Voisin’s text features statistics on violence against girls, it

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<sup>15</sup> Ralph, L. (2014). *Renegade Dreams: Living Through Injury in Gangland Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.

does so in a comparative manner--that is--he presents statistics on girls not to analyze how state and urban violence affect them, but to demonstrate *how much more* boys and men are affected by violence. Girls and women are not centered in an analysis of race, gender, and urban/state violence. They are merely statistical props to advance his analysis of male youth, violence, and trauma in Chicago.

Ignoring Black women's experiences erases cases like those of Rekia Boyd--one of the main catalysts for the Black Lives Matter Movement in Chicago. Organizations like the Chicago Foundation for Women have published a report addressing the conditions nonwhite women and girls in Chicago face. The Chicago Foundation for Women's aims are to "put time, talent, and money to work for women and girls who lack economic security and opportunity, freedom from violence, and equitable access to health care and services." It is to that end that, according to data from the Chicago Police Department, violent crime against women increased in 2017, with an average of 19 incidents of violence against women per day. These crimes disproportionately impact women of color, with Black women making up the majority of victims across the board. Black women accounted for 80 percent of survivors of human trafficking and 75 percent of homicide victims in Chicago in 2017.

Rarely does the public understand how encroaching gentrification creates poverty and sustained state surveillance. State surveillance means to protect white property and spaces while pushing Black and Brown residents out (Jacobs 2015). Social analysts tend to pathologize violence in urban spaces as immorality and the "culture of poverty" (Lewis 1959). These assumptions ascribe violence to the poor, disenfranchised Black and Brown

people that inhabit these spaces, with little analysis of state culpability in creating these spaces and conditions. Zenzele Isoke's (2013) *Urban Black Women and the Politics of Resistance* explores Black women's spatial resistance in Newark, New Jersey as they create community-based forms of mutual support and sustainability effectively transforming impoverished, carceral cityscapes into symbolic and cultural homeplaces. Isoke's work highlights how Black women transform spaces that were previously inaccessible to Black women (for a variety of reasons, most notably structural and interpersonal violence) into progressive spaces for them to gather. Building on this work, I similarly argue that Black women, femmes, and girls in Chicago are also transforming their relationship to Chicago through Black women/femme-led grassroots organizations making claims on space and citizenship.

Black communities experience state violence daily: hyper-surveillance by the state in the form of increased police presence, divestment in the form of derelict or otherwise inadequate housing, school closings, underfunded schools, few community resources, and the constant minimizing of state social and welfare services create a continuous cycle of poverty and violence. The residents of embattled communities in such conditions become stigmatized as inherently criminal because the state presumes they come from a "culture of poverty and lack," (Lewis 1959) and therefore are both violable by the state and easily disposable, as Christen Smith (2016) writes about the necropolitical logics that affect Afro-Brazilians. Sociological studies on race, gender, and criminality often reinforce public opinion/narratives on Blackness and depravity which foster anti-black, anti-poor state policies, as is reflected by both Khalil Muhammad's *The Condemnation of Blackness*:

*Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (2010) and Hortense Spillers' *Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book* (1987).

Living in urban areas like Chicago reflects what Christina Sharpe terms "in the wake": a form of consciousness--a constant awareness of one's self, sense of being, and subjectivity. Sharpe asks, "what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival?" (Sharpe 2018, 14). From community gardens to community art events that honor those lost to violence, and community protests, Black communities honor both the dead and the living, practice resilience, and build community in the wake of destruction (Smith 2016, Sharpe 2018). The narratives that color Black flesh as criminal, violent, and excessive have been consumed by the nation via popular media, so that everyday acts become criminal and result in calls to the police which in turn results in violence and even death<sup>16</sup>. Mass news media coverage often sensationalizes urban violence in order to captivate and stimulate passionate responses (Surette, 1998; Crayton and Glickman, 2007). Although violent crime in Chicago had seen a 30% decrease prior to the 2019 Covid pandemic, news stations played on the public's concern for public safety by concentrating on stories that highlighted homicides and gun violence in poor Black and Brown areas (Braga and Brunson 2015). The constant consumption of images of violence predominantly associated with bodies racialized as Black or Latine perpetuates an

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<sup>16</sup> In June 2019, forty-six year old Sircie Varnado was shot in the head by a white man who identified himself as a police officer after a verbal altercation in a West Side grocery market. Chicago Police Department claimed man is not an officer. He has not been apprehended.  
<https://thegrio.com/2019/06/17/chicago-police-walgreens-shooting-sircie-varnado/>



association between Blackness and criminality that was already imbedded in the national consciousness since emancipation<sup>17</sup>.

The same controlling images (Collins 1990) that stereotype Black women as loud, angry, combative, and licentious, also leave them incredibly vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence. Black women are not just secondary victims of violence, they are directly affected by urban violence, police brutality, domestic violence, institutional violence, and mass incarceration. This is why Black women have developed intersectional strategies to combat the multiple oppressions they face. In addition to highlighting the ways Black women experience and combat state violence, this dissertation aims to demystify the dichotomy between urban violence and state violence, or “Black on Black crime”, and police violence in Chicago. The Black women community members and organizers I spoke with view intra-community violence as a product of the state. This dissertation explores this relationship in more detail, especially to understand spaces like that of the Books, Brunch, and Botanica held for women and femmes of color. I draw heavily on queer Black feminist scholarship (Lorde 1982, 1984; Smith 1983; Ritchie 2017; Cohen 2004; Isoke 2011, 2013) to demystify the dichotomies my interlocutors challenged during my initial fieldwork, and highlight the gendered dimensions of this type of anti-black state violence.

## **Methodology**

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<sup>17</sup> Scholars such as Khalil Gibran Muhammad (2019), Tera Eva Agyepong (2018), Robyn Maynard (2017), Michelle Alexander (2013), Teri A. McMurtry-Chubb (2005) have examined the connection between the criminalization of Black people post-emancipation and the beginnings of mass incarceration as a tool of social control and free labor.

Black women's unique perspective and self-definition are important for constructing a standpoint that is empowering and reflective of Black women's struggle. However, "there is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic" (Collins 1991, 28). I draw on the conceptual frames of the Combahee River Collective's notion of interlocking forms of oppression and Patricia Hill Collins's theory of the matrix of domination to analyze the ways that Black women respond to their experiences with state violence. I understand the matrix of domination as the various ways that race, class, and gender overlap to affect how Black women experience oppression and relate to our surroundings and others.

This is a Black feminist ethnographic project. Black feminist ethnography is positioning one's work in "collaborative dialogue with groups or organizations concerned with a range of issues, especially as they affect marginalization," but particularly oriented toward issues that disproportionately and specifically affect (Black) women (Craven and Davis 2016). I am focused on the practices that women engage while addressing state violence. Feminist ethnography functions as both a politics and a practice—and it includes social commitments: engaging with these women and groups; volunteering and aiding one another and seeing these women as co-producers in this research. I observed and documented the motivations and methods used by Black women to identify, navigate, and combat this violence. By observing their strategies, I seek to document the limits of state responses to the violence that Black women face and also observe how state systems such as welfare and human services, courts, and policing all lead to and exacerbate these

women's vulnerability to state violence. My methodology is framed by the basic problems associated with two areas of interest: gendered racism and violence. I attended weekly meetings with the Let Us Breathe Collective, often taking notes that I would send in a word document to the group. I attended rallies, merchant pop-ups, collective painting and education events. I rarely attended protests due to lack of childcare and the risk of police or crowd violence that might risk my child's safety. I attended community testimonials about the abuses residents suffered at the hands of the police. The primary tools I used to search for Black-centered events in Chicago were social media sites such as Facebook groups for Chicago and the University of Chicago, Instagram accounts and hashtags that featured Chicago, Twitter, and I often searched the event-hosting platform, EventBrite.

As Black communities are under siege (Perry 2015), Black feminist anthropologists work in solidarity with social movement actors as they "negotiate 'dangerous fields'" (Perry 2015, 153). After my experiences with violence on the west side of Chicago, I find myself returning to Black feminist anthropology as a conceptual and methodological frame, following the question Perry asks, "[w]hat is at stake for the activist anthropologist who decides to work in a black community under siege by the state police, drug traffickers, and urban development agencies?" (Perry 2015, 153). According to Perry, "black racial subjection and anti-black violence, evident in symbolic and physical walls in urban communities...have a direct bearing on the ethnographer's pragmatic ability to be an activist, carry out social science research, and produce anti-hegemonic knowledge" (Perry

2015, 153). While Perry argues this<sup>18</sup> for Brazil, it also applies to Chicago, where this past July the police beat journalists (who were wearing easily identifiable credentials) at the scene of a protest. However, it is my job as a Black woman anthropologist to break down the barriers that exist between myself and grassroots feminists by ensuring that “feminist research methods...involve engagement, community-building, liberationist politics, and an overall commitment to social change” (Perry 2015, 153). This approach also connects to the methodological framework, *sister to sister*.

### Sister to Sister

As a Black woman interviewing Black women activists and artists, I avoided the position of researcher-as-stranger (Clifford 1986). Due to my familiarity with midwestern Black cultural norms and meanings, I was able to relate to Black women and femmes in Chicago with relative ease. I was open and honest about my identity as a graduate student interested in studying Chicago because of my own personal experiences with violence in Chicago and the fact that the rest of my maternal family still resides in Chicago, and I am just as concerned about the future of Chicago for them. What I also found was that it was motherhood often endeared me to members of these organizations; for example, my son

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<sup>18</sup> In “State Violence and the Ethnographic Encounter,” Keisha Khan Perry argues that Black women activist scholars must work in solidarity with the activists they research because the policing of these communities and individuals socially locates the Black woman ethnographer as a “gendered and racial captive of the state,” who is not simply a witness to violence, but also feels the “impact of collective racial subjection on Black women’s bodies, specifically women who are fighting for social justice and an end to criminal and police violence.” As such, these ethnographers’ “ability to be an activist, carry out social-science research, and produce anti-hegemonic knowledge” is limited and destabilized. However, it is the job of the Black woman anthropologist to break down the barriers that exist between themselves and grassroots feminists by ensuring that “feminist research methods... involve engagement, community-building, liberationist politics, and an overall commitment to social change” (Perry 2015, 153).

Joaquin was six years old at the time I began my fieldwork in Chicago. He has always had an extroverted, bubbly, and extremely quirky personality, and while I can be extroverted in spaces like nightclubs, I tend to be shy and not engage with many people, which makes interviews and data collection difficult. Joaquin especially loved to have conversations about science or technology and would strike up a conversation with anyone who engaged him. His presence at these sites often aided me in establishing connections with the people who frequented grassroots spaces or were members of the collectives and organizations I observed and with which I collaborated.

This granted me access to certain types of information, spaces, and individuals. I consider "mothering in the field". part of my methodology for the following reasons: 1. Bringing my son along with me to Black radical spaces allows me to fulfill my responsibility to my son by surrounding him with a strong sense of Black community, rearing him to respect and value all members of the Black community, especially Black women, girls, and femmes, and having him experience Black cultural sociality; 2. By raising him "in the field," I am also fulfilling my Black feminist commitment to be in community and solidarity with my people in Chicago and globally by teaching my son what abolition and Black liberation truly require of us--resilience, empathy, love, and the courage to fight for the most vulnerable of us.

Black feminists assert that African American women have a shared historical reality based on the dual subordination of both race and gender (Collins 1990; hooks1984). This subordination enables a clearer understanding of the relationships among systems of oppression (Collins 1990). The marginalization of Black women as members of a specific

group characterized by their gender and race creates a shared experience. Black feminists argue that there is a complex dual relationship in both Black culture and the dominant culture that Black women have to negotiate in their daily interactions (hooks 1984). Thus, as a Black woman researching Black women, I was considered a racial and gendered insider.

As such, I engaged in what Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) refer to as “sister-to-sister talk.” They define sister-to-sister talk as “Afrocentric slang to describe congenial conversation or positive relating in which life lessons might be shared between Black women” (205). Participating in sister-to-sister talk requires a form of cultural competence. It mandated that I adopt approaches that, “both reflect and respect the values, expectations, and preferences” (Pinderhughes 1989; 163) of Black women in Chicago. I navigate Chicago as a light-skinned, Afro-Puerto Rican, cis heterosexual, working-class, single mother who co-parents long-distance. I am also a former sex worker. My specific positionality and experience with the types of violence I write about in my dissertation, inform my connection to and desire to do this research. I am uniquely positioned to understand and elucidate the connections between race, place, gender, sexuality, and state violence in Chicago, as they affect Black women, femmes, and girls. In fact, my experience with police violence and sexual harassment led me to title this project *Jezebel*, to draw attention to the prevailing trope regarding the presumed hypersexuality, un-rapeability, and criminal sexual deviance of Black women and femmes.

However, I am also aware of my outsider status. I did not grow up in Chicago on the South Side. I left Chicago at a young age, after my mother moved me and my siblings

an hour and a half north to Milwaukee, WI. Although I visited Chicago for holidays and summers, I was not a resident of Chicago who was directly impacted by the structural violence in the day-to-day. I also did not speak with one of the varying “Chicago” dialects, a carry-over of southern “twang” in accent from the Great Migration era. Despite this, due to the fact that the entirety of my mother’s family is from and lives in Chicago, I have always felt and maintained a close connection with them and the city, spending summers with my cousins in Humboldt Park.

#### Analysis of news articles and social media posts:

Social media has become a platform of choice for many who identify as activists. It allows for the rapid and easily digestible dissemination of knowledge. It has made knowledge and activism accessible to many who may previously have been excluded, and allows individuals to consume news in real-time--making organizing a faster endeavor. Due to this, scholars and activist-scholars have come to understand social media as an important ethnographic site of inquiry. As such, I mirror research that treats social media data as ethnography (Murthy 2008; Bonilla and Rosa 2015) or as documents for close reading (Morrison 2014; Brock 2016; Steele 2016).

Gabriella Modan (2016) explores how social media as a channel of communication impacts the relationship between ethnographers and the members of the communities they study in her article (2016). As Modan states, social media interactions may “bring written language into a relationship that often privileges spoken interaction, they may allow

different facets of identity to emerge, reconfigure a researcher's network of relationships in the field site, or change the personal professional divide” (98). Using social media as an ethnographic tool has made it easier for me to establish and maintain contacts and connections in the field when I am not physically present to do so. It is through social media that I have built friendships with activists in Chicago who then put me in contact with *their* networks and have vouched for me so that I could become a member of organizations and collectives in Chicago. Social media platforms allow many of these collectives to mobilize and circulate important knowledge to their communities in a timely manner. Alternatively, some scholars have focused on social media as an investigative tool into the lives of gang-affiliated youth<sup>19</sup> in order to understand what role social media plays as both a tool used to disseminate violence by youth and a tool to intervene in said violence.

### **Dissertation Outline**

Chapter One (“The Black Metropolis or Jim Crow Flies North”) details how Chicago came to be the “Black Metropolis” of St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s research. This chapter also examines the sociopolitical history of the Chicago Police, their repression of the Black community, and contemporary Black politicians that serve as political overseers meant to manage Black Chicago. I also explore the relationship between state actors such as Barack Obama and the current Mayor of Chicago, Lori Lightfoot, and local activists.

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<sup>19</sup> Patton, D., Eschmann, R., Elsaesser, C., & Bocanegra, E. (2016). Sticks, stones and Facebook accounts: What violence outreach workers know about social media and urban-based gang violence in Chicago. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65(C), 591–600. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.052>



Chapter Two (“The Block is Hot: Black Women, Sex Work, and Policing”) presents a theoretical discussion on Black women, policing, and space. Here, I discuss how the anti-solicitation ordinance passed in July 2018 follows a genealogy of racially motivated anti-loitering laws of the 90s that targeted people of color on the West and South sides of Chicago during the “War on drugs” and gangs. This chapter discusses the ordinance as a mechanism of state violence that regulates Black women’s mobility, using legal scholarship and critical race theory, as well as Black feminist geography to address how this law both creates and reorders space, and why this uniquely affects Black women. It also focuses on sex work and activism, especially my time spent with the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP). Sex Work is often ignored as an area of activist research. Sex workers in Chicago play an important role in organizing against policies that target and disproportionately affect Black women, women of color, and trans women of color. In Chicago, sex work and its advocates are organizing around the same issues of state violence in the form of police brutality, economic disparity/poverty, and urban violence, but are not always organizing together. I believe it is important to place these groups in direct conversation.

Chapter Three, “Remembering a Praxis of Mothering and Care in Community” analyzes mothering (collective/communal) as a site of radical possibility as well as a site of political struggle animated by antiblack state violence. Through autoethnography and a Black queer feminist analysis of mothering and the fight for reproductive justice, this chapter explores what it means to mother communally in the face of violence, and collective care as a form of resistance.

Chapter Four (“Liminal Freedoms: Black Queer Feminist Spatial Praxis”) introduces the organizations I worked with and observed during my fieldwork and analyzes the relationship between the state, activists, and the communities they serve. Organizations such as the Let Us Breathe Collective, Black Youth Project 100, Assata’s Daughters, and individual mothers in the struggle for justice have lost sons and daughters to state violence. In this chapter, I give an ethnographic account of my work with the collective and community.

The concluding chapter (“Toward a Non-Conclusive End”) discusses what Black, queer, and feminist politics mean for Chicago and ultimately, Black liberation. In this chapter, I provide details on how I came to this iteration of my dissertation—what worked, what didn’t, what changed, and why.

## **The Black Metropolis, or, Jim Crow Flies North**

“I was leaving the South  
to fling myself into the unknown . . .  
I was taking a part of the South  
to transplant in alien soil,  
to see if it could grow differently,  
if it could drink of new and cool rains,  
bend in strange winds,  
respond to the warmth of other suns  
and, perhaps, to bloom”

— **Richard Wright**

## **Chicago History**

The first stewards of the land now known as Chicago were the Council of the Three Fires: the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Odawa Nations, along with the Miami, the Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sac, Fox, Kickapoo, and Illinois nations. The first nonnative person to occupy the land was a mulatto Haitian immigrant by the name of Jean Baptiste Du Sable. Du Sable established a trading post at the mouth of the river in the 1770s. Not long after, white people began to occupy the land in small numbers, at first. Following the construction of Fort Dearborn in 1803, the American military and government saw the opportunity to seize the land through force—they sponsored wars with Indigenous tribes and settler colonialist projects in the region. This resulted in the 1833 Treaty of Chicago which dispossessed the

Potawatomi and paved the way for the influx of white settlers in the growing lakeshore town (Balto 2019). The city of Chicago was built on violent dispossession, a theme that would continue on into the 21st century.

Not long after the legal end of slavery, African Americans began to move to Chicago from the South in large numbers. Historians have written extensively on the intricacies of the First and Second Great Migrations, which took place between 1917 and the 1970s. Scholars such as Darlene Clark Hine, James Grossman, Joe Trotter, Luther Adams, and others elucidate the nuanced socioeconomic, political, and personal reasons millions of Black southerners migrated to urban communities in the North, West, and Midwest. The most well-known narratives of these journeys and how these migrants adjusted to urban life center on the experiences of adults. Marcia Chatelain's (2015) *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* attends to this gap by shifting to the perspective of Black girls and a lens of Black girlhood to understand African American anxieties around race (notions of respectability and racial uplift), place, and class (both economic mobility and citizenship) in Chicago. For Black Chicagoans, Black girls represented their hopes for the future along with their fears; "Chicago community leaders scrutinized black girls' behavior, evaluated their choices, and assessed their possibilities as part of a larger conversation about what urbanization ultimately meant for black citizens" (Chatelain 2015: 2). I would argue that this is still true; community organizations in Chicago like Assata's Daughters recognize the need to engage young Black girls as world-makers and trendsetters with the power to enact change.

I am unsure of the exact date my maternal grandmother Catherine Lee moved from Widener, Arkansas, to Chicago, Illinois. However, I would estimate she did so around the early 1950s. My aunt, Renee Roby, has filled in many of the gaps in our familial history, serving as the oral historian I needed for personal and professional reasons. From what I can recall—when I spent my youth following my grandmother around like a second shadow, pestering her for stories of her life—she was in her young teenage years when she left the South. She belonged to a larger exodus—the second half of the Great Migration—of Black families and individuals leaving the South (fleeing it, in most cases) for what they hoped were better economic opportunities and less racism in the North. My grandmother was from a small farm town, not a large city. But I think she adapted to city life as well as possible. She lived for a time on the city’s South Side in Bronzeville. Today, Bronzeville is still considered a (historically) Black neighborhood, just as it would have been when my grandmother arrived. Only in the early 1900s was it known as “the Black Belt”—a stretch of land where thousands were crammed into tiny, often shared “accommodations.”

Chicago was one of several cities African Americans migrated to from the southernmost United States. Those who left for the Midwest and Northeast did so for various reasons; chief among them was fleeing the antiblack violence and attitudes they faced across the South. They fled such horrors as lynchings, massacres, poverty, and a continuation of involuntary servitude in the form of debt-peonage: sharecropping, chain gangs, and prison labor camps. They viewed the North as a site of change and opportunity. In truth, they learned that while opportunities to earn a living could be found in the North, the antiblack hostilities they sought to outrun also existed.

## **White Mob Violence**

The history of state-sponsored violence against poor Black and Brown communities in Chicago is not a recent phenomenon. As Simon Balto (2019) writes, “the same racist logics that undergirded the slave regime and upheld its political legitimacy deeply shaped life for Black Chicagoans,” and examples of this ranged from the Illinois state constitution technically permitting some forms of slavery, along with disenfranchisement in voting, housing, and other areas of civic life (19). In the mid-1880s, Black residents successfully lobbied for a state civil rights bill that was never enforced. Daily racism did not stem the influx of African Americans to Chicago, however, as the Black population would soar from 44,000 in 1910 to more than 235,000 by the 1930s (Balto 2019). *Black Metropolis* by sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton offers insights into the belief held by many African Americans that the migration represented “a step toward the economic emancipation of a people” who for so long were ensnared by the antiblack brutality of the South (Drake and Cayton 1945; 31). Indeed, my grandmother, Catherine, bought a house on the West Side of Chicago near Humboldt Park well after Polish immigrants began to abandon their neighborhoods as more African Americans and Puerto Ricans began to integrate formerly white areas.

The Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North and West regions of the United States marked a particular point of history as Black mobility created new frontiers of possibility and restructuring of racial space. However, the North,

specifically the Midwest, was not free of the racial terror they had fled in the South. Black people who settled in Chicago were met with constrained mobility and economic opportunities, hyper-surveillance, and other burgeoning carceral logics that plague Black communities today. This influx of Black migrants precipitated the increase in police, technologies of surveillance, and urban restructuring to segregate Black and white communities.

### **The Rise of the Chicago Police Department**

By the 1920s, Chicago indeed was a town of (im)migrants: four out of five Chicagoans were first-generation or foreign-born, and the Black population was still rising (Balto 2019; McWhirter 2012). The various white ethnic groups (German, Polish, and Irish) that established themselves on the South and West Sides of Chicago brought their own cultures and customs and, in turn, influenced the city around them by creating social institutions and charities that served their tight-knit communities. Despite the contribution of immigrant labor in building Chicago's industrial economy, immigrant communities were viewed as "inherently unruly, constantly drunk, and later, politically suspect" (Balto 2019; 15). Members of the business class and political elite united over their concerns about the public behavior and image of white immigrants—seeking to forcefully impose their own set of morals that restricted leisure activities, drinking, and would prevent immigrants from challenging the status quo. In order to do this, elites used their political (and financial) power to push for the incorporation of a police force, formally founded in 1853. During

this time, every American city created a formal police force between the 1840's and the close of the 1880's (Balto 2019; McWhirter 2012).

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 marked a turning point in Chicago's policing history. The strike spread nationwide, overwhelming police across the country who had not yet become the tried and tested repressive hand of the State. Chicago police, however, "proved fairly adept at crushing the strike's local iteration--most notably, by using extraordinary force and violence"--something that would not change in the future (Balto 2019, 17). This prompted wealthy elites to take whatever measures necessary to ensure that state and municipal governments served their interests. Chief among them being the maintenance of order. Louis Althusser (1971) points out that in the Marxist tradition, the State is "explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus. The State is a 'machine' of repression, which enables the ruling classes...to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion (i.e. capitalist exploitation)" (90). This relationship is very clear when considering the history of the formation of Chicago Police and their roles from 1853 to now. The State apparatus encompasses "the police, the courts, the prisons; but also the army, which (the proletariat has paid for this experience with its blood) intervenes directly as a supplementary repressive force in the last instance, when the police and its specialized auxiliary corps are 'outrun by events'; and above this ensemble, the head of State, the government and the administration" (Althusser 2006, 90). On May 3, 1886, over one hundred thousand employees of McCormick Reaper works turned out to demand an 8-hour workday by protesting in 8-hour shifts in picket lines. This demonstration led to a



confrontation with police that led to the death of one striker. The next day during a protest against the events the night before, an unknown person threw a bomb at the police, killing seven police officers and four civilians, while injuring dozens more. Police then fired at protestors, killing one and injuring others. This became known as the Haymarket Affair, also known as the Haymarket Riot, which became a symbol of the international struggle for workers' rights.

While the police force in Chicago was originally formed by politicians and wealthy elites to control immigrant behaviors, antiblack attitudes against the influx of Black citizens prompted politicians to redirect police focus: “The State apparatus, which defines the State as a force of repressive execution and intervention ‘in the interests of the ruling classes’ in the class struggle conducted by the bourgeoisie and its allies against the proletariat, is quite certainly the State, and quite certainly defines its basic function” (Althusser 1970, 90).

The increasing presence of the Black population in Chicago was treated as a problem by white powerbrokers: police, politicians, and wealthy white citizens. The incoming groups of rural Black people were stereotyped as dangerous, sexually lascivious, and prone to vice necessitating the “guardianship and advice of their white masters and friends” (McWhirter 2012, 118; Balto 2019). Even before the Great Migration, policing and policies were racialized: in order to appease white patrons, they funneled vice to Black communities and kept it there. This was meant to keep Black communities segregated from white and demonstrated how policing not only became targeted at Black communities, but also the lack of care for the well-being of those communities. City-sponsored repression of prostitution in the New Levee district resulted in vice being pushed even further into the

Black Belt where sex workers faced less police harassment (Drake and Cayton 1945; Blair 2010).

Cynthia Blair's (2010) work on sex workers in "turn-of-the-century" Chicago elucidates one aspect of the relationship between policing in the Black Belt and class conflict within the Black community. The increased visibility of Black sex workers in Chicago presented a problem for those Black individuals that considered themselves part of a Black "upper-class" (families that had lived in Chicago before the Great Migration) who believed in economic mobility, but on terms they deemed respectable. This clash in contrast between financial motivation and respectability politics made Black sex workers the target of police and Black businessmen alike as these women were blamed for the decline in the Black community. However, despite the derogatory association of sex work, it provided Black women with the means to resist restrictive middle-class values as they negotiated "working-class notions of respectability, individual self-respect, and economic self-reliance" (Blair 2010, 11). Blair's work demonstrates that Black women in Chicago have a long history as conscious actors and historical agents of social change.

Funneling vice and police vice squads into Black communities was not the only way police both maintained the residential color line and demonstrated their lack of concern for the well-being of Black people in Chicago. Police often ignored the mounting violence that constituted a "central aspect of Chicago's white supremacist praxis" by white civilians, which served to maintain residential segregation (Balto 2019; 24). To understand the current conditions for Black Chicago, it is imperative to understand how the relentless

violence of white mobs and white gangs gave rise to Black militancy as Black communities sought to protect themselves.

On July 27, 1919, seventeen-year-old Eugene Williams and three of his friends were swimming at Twenty-Ninth Street beach on Chicago's South Side. While the beaches were not formally segregated by law, the color lines were fervently maintained by white beachgoers and police, with Black people's "place" being two hundred yards north, just east of where Twenty-Fifth Street ended (Balto 2019). As Williams and his friends pushed a raft out into the water intending to reach "Hot and Cold," a little island just offshore, the strong lake current pushed them south past the breakwater that signaled the northern edge of the white area of the beach. Enraged by the sight of Black boys floating in "white" waters, a man named George Stauber began throwing rocks down at the boys and their raft. Williams went under and was dead by the time divers reached him.

After climbing from the water, William's friends alerted a Black police officer, who then approached Stauber to question him. A white officer named Daniel Callahan intervened (as often occurred, pulling rank) and told the Black officer not to arrest Stauber. Instead, Callahan arrested one of the Black men shouting in outrage at the lack of justice, calling for Stauber's arrest. As tempers flared, white and Black people shouted at one another and hurled rocks, leading to a rapidly spreading wave of violence. As Isabel Wilkerson (2010) writes, "[w]hite gangs stormed the black belt, setting houses on fire, hunting down black residents, firing shotguns, and hurling bricks" (273).

It has been acknowledged by those who analyzed the events of that summer that officer Callahan's refusal to arrest Stauber for the death of Eugene Williams is what

precipitated the infamous Red Summer riots. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations (CCRR) assessed two years after the riots, “the drowning and the refusal to arrest, or widely circulated reports of such a refusal, must be considered together as marking the inception of the riot...There was every possibility that the clash, without further stimulus of the policeman’s conduct, would have quieted down (Balto, 2019; 32). However, the quote above only demonstrates how little concern police show for white mob violence, taking particular care with the idea that if Black Chicagoans had not spread the word about the refusal to arrest, the city would not have erupted as it did. This sentiment was echoed by Callahan’s police chief John Garrity, who stated “[i]f these charges [of refusal] to arrest are true, I believe Callahan is responsible for this outrageous rioting” (Balto 2019; 32). Placing the blame solely on one police officer’s actions ignored the history and pattern of the Chicago Police Department’s vitriol and neglect towards the Black community.

Simon Balto (2019) gives a very detailed history of Black Chicago, white mob violence, and the CPD’s complicity in sanctioning violence against Black communities. According to Balto (2019):

While racial frictions had arisen intermittently in Chicago for decades—particularly around labor strife and Chicago employer’s affection for using African Americans as strikebreakers against labor’s demands—it was in Black people’s search for housing that white rage crescendoed. Over the course of forty-five months from July 1917 to March 1921, white citizens and neighborhood associations bombed 58 homes—all of them belonging to black people moving to white areas, or to people who had rented to or brokered such deals for blacks. (p. 24)

During this four-year bombing campaign, the police did little to nothing to stem the wanton violence. The homes of notable politicians like Oscar De Priest and Jesse Binga, one of the wealthiest bankers/entrepreneurs in Black Chicago, were bombed. Even with high-profile Black citizens being affected, police only arrested one person in connection with the widespread violence. Balto writes that “prior to the riot, Police Chief John Garrity told an incredulous Ida Wells-Barnett that he ‘could not put all the police in Chicago on the South Side to protect the homes of colored people’” (2019; 25). During the riots that began with William’s murder, thirty-eight Chicagoans died, more than 2500 others were injured, and thousands were left homeless (Balto 2019). The welfare of Black communities was not a priority.

Before the arrival of the National Guard, the hefty task of quelling the riot fell to the police. Their tactics involved “blanketing the South Side generally with nearly every one of the department’s 3,500 officers, and for sending four-fifths of the entire department’s force—2,800 officers—into the Black Belt specifically” (Balto 2019; 32). Strategically, this meant police were there to protect the white neighborhoods that bordered the Black Belt, while allowing no one in or out. This also meant that Black people were effectively quarantined inside the Black Belt, but exposed to the violence that occurred mostly outside of it when they left. What is more, white gangs also began to terrorize Black civilians. After four days of violence, it would take the national guard to help subdue the riot as the police could not. Deadly white mobs, most often led by white gangs, such as the Irish Bridgeport-based Ragen’s Colts and the Hamburg Club (future mayor Richard Daley was a member of the Hamburg Club during the riots and later became its president)

attacked unsuspecting Black employees in businesses outside the Black Belt. These white gangs were never prosecuted as they had the protection of white powerbrokers in Chicago, often working for the same politicians as the police (Balto 2019).

Due to the negligent and otherwise non-existent police response to whites terrorizing the Black community, the Chicago Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began their own investigations into the matter to find and prosecute those behind the bombings (Balto 2019; 25). The climate of violence with little chance of reprieve, police often-times joining in by beating Black men and arresting them afterward all contributed to the 1919 riot as Chicago “spiraled into racial fury, provoking questions about policing, racism, and justice” (Balto 2019; 25). These questions are still pertinent even now.

As we see, the rise of Chicago’s carceral landscape began long before the war on drugs or crime. According to Simon Balto (2019), by the year 1970, “nearly every identifiable component of today’s policing apparatus was already in evidence, in some form or another, on Chicago’s black South and West Sides” (5). This included zero-tolerance policing known as “aggressive preventative patrol”-- what Balto asserts served as the template for “broken windows” policies. Along with this, stop-and-frisk was the result of federal policy and the lobbying influence of CPD officials and the Democratic Mayor Richard Daley in collaboration with Conservative Republicans (Balto 2019; 5). This chapter’s main argument is that Chicago politicians’ neoliberal push for “law and order” has created a carceral space that necessitates alternative (Black, queer, and feminist) modes of community-building, healing, and organizing. Within this neoliberal order, the antiblack

state employs tokenized people of color who support increasingly punitive measures of social control under a guise of paternalism that relies heavily on stereotypes about criminality, morality, and parenthood. Along with this, Black politicians have embraced identity politics as a political strategy, appealing to Black, poor voters with the promise of change. Instead, Black voters and citizens are left disappointed and disillusioned when their most pressing concerns are not heard and their needs are unmet.

The organizations and collectives headed by Black women, femmes, and nonmen in Chicago have embraced abolition as a solution to the carceral systems so deeply and historically embedded in policies and attitudes in Chicago. Collectives and groups like Let Us Breathe, BYP and BYP 100, Assata's Daughters, and Good Kids MAD City, are just a few examples of youth and young adults across Chicago who are organizing in the unstable gaps between the carceral and abolition, militantly pursuing transnational goals (Wilson Gilmore 2018). These grassroots groups have been working toward improving the quality of life for Chicago's most marginalized citizens in various ways. Many of the above organizations are guided by a Black queer feminist ethic and praxis that recognizes that there are radical alternatives to care for and keep Chicago communities safe, chief among them being abolition.

Miriame Kaba defines abolition as “a political vision, a structural analysis of oppression, and a practical organizing strategy” that envisions a “restructured society in a world where we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more things that are foundational to our personal and community safety” (Kaba 2022; 2). Abolition is not about tearing down but about building a new world.

Abolition is about transformation, community, and together imagining strategies for safety, care, and accountability that don't rely on carceral logics for solutions. However, abolition represents a threat to Chicago's political elite, so the petitions and ideas for change voiced by Black and Brown Chicagoans have been ignored, rejected, or even demonized in order to maintain the neoliberal status quo.

### **All Skinfolk Aint Kinfolk:**

#### **Respectability Politics, Paternalism, Fictive Kinship, and Black Political Overseers**

*"It follows then that many African-Americans ask, how can we advance if one we have sent forth in the vanguard ignores our concerns? In these bloody days and frightful nights when an urban warrior can find no face more despicable than his own, no ammunition more deadly than self-hate and no target more deserving of his true aim than his brother, we must wonder how we came so late and lonely to this place... We need to haunt the halls of history and listen anew to the ancestors' wisdom."*

-Maya Angelou, "I Dare To Hope," 1991

How did we come so late and lonely to this place? This sentence haunts me. Maya Angelou wrote the 1991 op-ed essay "I Dare to Hope" in response to the appointment of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. Thomas' nomination was an extremely contentious issue within the Black community, particularly his conservative stance and Anita Hill's testimony that Thomas sexually harassed Hill during her employment with him. Angelou begins the essay with a note on Niccolo Machiavelli's manual, *The Prince*, on how to obtain and wield power over the powerless by causing division and in-fighting. As she considers how Thomas' conservative views and actions have often been, at best indifferent to the plight of African Americans, and at worst, "anti-affirmative action, anti-



busing and anti-other opportunities to redress inequality in our country.” As his actions have been in opposition to the very rights that Black freedom fighters have fought tooth and nail to win, Angelou asks the question, “how can we advance if one we have sent forth in the vanguard ignores our concerns?” Angelou goes on to state that while she supports Clarence Thomas's nomination, she is “neither naive enough nor hopeful enough to imagine that in publicly supporting him [she] will give the younger generation a pretty picture of unity,” but rather, she wants to demonstrate that she and they “come from a people who had the courage to be when being was dangerous, who had the courage to dare when daring was dangerous -- and most important, had the courage to hope.”

However, the youth, while believing in restorative justice, are no longer bound by the imperative of identity politics. The organizations fighting on the ground in Chicago understand that representation without action is detrimental to Black people in this country—tokenism maintains the status quo. She urges us to “haunt the halls of history and listen anew to the ancestor’s wisdom. I would add that the ancestors also speak through us, and the youth is the new radical vanguard to whom we should listen instead of demonizing the way they express their political dissent and frustration with a system that has stolen away and continues to steal countless lives.

The rhetoric of “Black on Black crime” delegitimizes Black communities’ claims to services that promote self-sufficiency and economic mobility. By criminalizing Black communities and Black activism, the state enacts measures to crush community efforts of autonomy and mutual aid while justifying state-sponsored Black genocide through intentional neglect and over-policing. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains with her

examination of carcerality, shifting constrained state resources from “social investment to social expense”—investing in more police rather than urban infrastructure and community resources—ultimately leads to the rapid deterioration of Black communities (Gilmore 2007). In Chicago, this has been done at the state level by Black politicians who invoke a “fictive kinship” (Stack 1974) and employ paternalistic rhetoric to justify the need for more punitive efforts to control crime. Black politicians in Chicago such as Barack Obama, Lori Lightfoot, Kim Foxx, and Jason Ervin, under the guise of “fictive kinship” (Stack 1974) utilize the rhetoric of paternalism to support and/or enact increasingly punitive measures (laws/policies/initiatives) to regulate/correct poor Black communities as a mode of addressing perceived “cultures of lack” (Lewis 1959). This state surveillance exacerbates violence against and within Black communities.

Neoliberalism and respectability politics operate through many of Chicago’s political actors, resulting in what I call a “Black Political Overseer Class” that manages Black communities. One of the most prominent examples in Chicago’s case is former President Barack Obama’s “My Brother’s Keeper” program and his insistence on publicly admonishing the US Black community using tropes and stereotypes of absent fatherhood and broken homes.

Barack Obama’s 2008 speech to the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago cited the broken family structure—absent fathers—as the cause of gun violence and criminality in Chicago. He states:

But if we are honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that what too many fathers also are is missing — missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have

abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it. You and I know how true this is in the African-American community. We know that more than half of all black children live in single-parent households, a number that has doubled — doubled — since we were children.

Obama's constant usage of the word "we" and his insistence that "you and I *know*" as if he and his Black audience share insider knowledge of a general Black experience in Chicago evoke a sense of fictive kinship (Stack 1974). This faux- extra-familial relationship on the basis of identity politics is what gives Obama the authority to blame the contemporary ills of Black Chicago on what it sees as a lack of morality, work ethic, and broken family structure, easily eliding the role of the local government. He emphasizes the death toll and impact of gun violence in order to validate his support for the increase in police on Chicago's streets. His attempt to relate to Chicago's Black community on the basis of Blackness as fatherlessness and simultaneously the promise of generational cycle-breaking (what Black spiritualists today would call breaking general curses)--a bootstrap narrative--a chance to turn Chicago around if they follow the lead of the neoliberal, respectable, Black middle class.

Another member of the Black Overseer Class is Chicago District attorney Kim Foxx. She campaigned for office in 2015 and 2016, while her incumbent Anita Alvarez was heavily criticized for the way she responded to several high-profile police shootings in Chicago, most notably the killing of teenager Laquan McDonald. Foxx unseated her in the Democratic primary and won the general election with 72 percent of the vote. Tensions

around racist and deadly policing practices led to Foxx's election as she vowed to transform the nation's second-largest local prosecutor's office. She promised to do so through more accountability in shootings by police while also reducing unnecessary prosecutions for low-level, non-violent crimes. Due to this (and because she is a Black woman), Foxx has faced resistance from police unions. However, these promises contradict the fact that she joined a task force aimed at reducing the number of incarcerated women, as the 2018 anti-prostitution ordinance gives cops the authority to target, detain, and arrest people in them if they are "loitering for the purposes of prostitution" in designated "hotspots." This already follows on the heels of anti-gang and anti-loitering-related laws that target ethnic and racial minorities.

In chapter two, I discuss how an alderman on Chicago's westside also relies on the politics of respectability and the rhetoric of paternalism to enact policies that have the potential to harm Black, Brown women, queer and trans people. What goes unsaid is how the stereotyping and scapegoating of Black communities as fatherless and thus driving up crime rates renders the Black mother fungible. She becomes, as Spillers (1987) writes, "a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human social arrangements" (66). The Black mother becomes the controlling image(s) surrounding black women and motherhood, sexuality, reproduction, poverty, and violence. It is through these narratives that the violence against black women is legitimized.

Spillers asserts that social science argues that the "weakness" of a fatherless Black family ignores how Black families have been constructed to be fatherless because of the legacy of slavery. And to add to that, the prison industrial complex has torn Black families

apart, necessitating Black women to create alternative family structures. Moynihan blames perpetual poverty and what he sees as a lack of work ethic on Black women as he argues that children both gain property through their father and also learn work ethic through their father. This rhetoric continues today as examples of these stereotypes can be seen in the August 2018 weekend address given by the mayor of Chicago. Mayor Rahm Emanuel gave a flustered speech that all but stated that the city's deadliest weekend was due to the failed Black family unit: "This may not be politically correct, but I know the power of what faith and family can do," the mayor said. "Our kids need that structure... I am asking...that we also don't shy away from a full discussion about the importance of family and faith helping to develop and nurture character, self-respect, a value system, and a moral compass that allows kids to know good from bad and right from wrong." The rhetoric of the absent father and emasculating matriarch—controlling images—work to turn public opinion in support of an authoritarian government that manages its Black/queer population through increasingly punitive means. This is made possible by the recruitment of a rising Black middle class eager to serve as political overseers, or junior partners in white supremacy.

Lori Lightfoot was elected Chicago's first Black, openly lesbian mayor on April 2nd, 2019. She assumed office on May 20th, 2019 and her current term ends on May 15th, 2023. Before her term as mayor, from 2015 to 2018, Lightfoot served as President of the Chicago Police Board, appointed by Mayor Rahm Emmanuel. She was a former prosecutor and never held elective office. She ran on a platform that emphasized it was an independent

reform candidate in the race and thus not “tied to the broken political machine<sup>20</sup>.” Her “no strings attached” platform appealed to those in Chicago who wanted to see real change and also identified with someone whose identity was considered marginalized. When asked what qualified her to run the city, Lightfoot responded with her experience in city government, where she managed budgets and supervised employees. Her campaign stated that quality neighborhoods, public safety, and the city’s affordability for working families were priorities.

Lightfoot capitalized on identity politics and exaggerated her progressive stance—now she has come to represent intentional state neglect. Lightfoot has a habit of ignoring local community groups that feel one of their only recourse is to gain an audience with her is to attend public meetings where they have to shout out their needs and demands as she tries to shut them down or have them ushered out. One particular example of this is Lightfoot’s repeated run-ins with Assata’s Daughters who have publicly challenged Lightfoot’s lack of action and willingness to work with local groups on issues of poverty, violence reduction, and investing in Black communities. Another organization Lightfoot refuses to work with is Good Kids Mad City (GKMC), a program based in Englewood (southside), Chicago. GKMC is dedicated to fighting violence in Chicago by educating the youth and building community and trust through positive youth engagement and community service projects. They offer safe recreational spaces for youth to engage in the

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<sup>20</sup> Chicago Tribune “Hours after historic election, Lori Lightfoot and Toni Preckwinkle each argue they’re more progressive than the other” February 27, 2019.

arts or sports, have the youth learn first-aid trauma skills from professionals, and also train them in de-escalation, communication, leadership, etc.

This group has created what is known as the “Peace Book,” a website and app that provides a resource directory identifying wraparound services and job opportunities with the purpose of reducing youth incarceration. The Peace Book centers restorative justice practices inside schools, courts, and juvenile detention centers. Understanding that violence and crime in Chicago are inextricably linked to divestment in neighborhoods like Englewood and others like it, the peace book documents the inequality that contributes to intergenerational poverty and trauma in order to propose solutions. In order to curb violence, the Peace Book offers models and instructions on how to broker neighborhood-based peace treaties. It also identifies Peacekeepers in each ward who have the experience and relationships required to conduct peace negotiation and violence interruption. Various other remedies to gun violence proposed by the peace book include free drug treatment centers, trauma centers, trauma-informed schools, mental health care clinics, standby psychiatrists or therapists, restorative justice, community centers, transformative justice, fair housing, food justice, and economic justice.

Good Kids Mad City, along with other organizations I write about in the forthcoming chapters, embody Ella Baker’s quote “[o]ppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, have the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see the world for what it is, and move to transform it.” First-hand experience with state violence and its aftereffects is the foundation upon which these organizations’ solutions are built. GKMC has approached Lori Lightfoot and other alderpeople several

times with their proposal of the Peace Book Ordinance to no avail and have taken to social media platforms like Twitter to spread the message for support.

## **When Everywhere is “The Field”**

### *2017 research observations*

The summer of 2017 is the summer I began my preliminary research in Chicago. I flew from Austin, Texas, to Chicago Midway airport where I was picked up by a dark-skinned driver with immaculate locks that reached his shoulder blades. He introduced himself as Antun and was very talkative and friendly, asking where I was from and if I was in town visiting the city. I told him that I was originally from Chicago, but moved away when I was young, and that I was back for research purposes. At that point, Antun became even more engaged and asked about my project. He perked up and told me that he was from the South Side, but that the West Side was beginning to rival the South in drive-by shootings and murders. At this, I nod slowly, only because I had always thought the West Side was just as violent as the South, from mine and my family’s own personal experience. The conversation eventually shifted from “E-way” (express way) shootings to local murders.

Antun began to talk about a (then) recent double homicide that took place on the South Side that killed a man and toddler, and left a pregnant woman wounded. Antun remarked that the entire situation was tragic, but that the survivor had “her own role to play” in the shooting because “as a local, she knew the rules of the streets.” He believed



that because she chose to ride around in the car with a drug dealer who had to contend with rivals, she knew the risks. According to Antun, she exacerbated the situation, by “woofing” on Facebook Live. “Woofing” is a Black slang term for using speech or actions to provoke, intimidate, challenge or bluff. Colloquially, she was fronting and trying to act hard, and this is what Antun believes led to two deaths, and as Antun explained to me, she “let” the men get the upperhand.

While I understood he was beholden to the etiquette of streetlife, there existed within me conflict between wanting to hold space for his particular interpretations on how to keep one’s self safe in a conflict, while also reckoning with the fact that these types of analyses also place the culpability on Black women for other people’s actions. This scapegoating mirrors what is often heard in popular discourse, but also in formal political discourse. Black women, Black mothers specifically, are blamed for being irresponsible and making “bad” decisions that put themselves or others in danger.

In June 2020, Chicago was one of a series of cities across the nation to erupt into protests around the nature of policing, state violence, and the murder of Minnesota resident George Floyd by Minnesota Police officers. Chicago is no stranger to protest or police violence. While George Floyd may have been the catalyst for this particular uprising, Chicago police’s sordid history of hyper-surveillance and regular community abuses are what fueled the demonstrations. Activists on the ground have been highlighting the murders of Black women by CPD, the murders of Black Trans Women in their communities, and the missing Black women for whom the CPD has not cared to search.

Alderman Ray Lopez of the Southwest side of Chicago questioned Mayor Lightfoot about the strategies she would employ to “stop the violence” that kicked off after the protests for George Floyd. Lightfoot curtly dismissed his concerns with “I think you’re 100% full of shit, is what I think.” Lightfoot maintains an anti-abolitionist stance, refusing to back local grassroots organizers asking for the defunding and gradual dismantling of the Chicago police department, all demonstrate her inability to see how reform has not, and cannot work. Lightfoot’s inability to imagine a world where all communities had their needs met, lived equitably and crime was virtually non-existent, is not anomalous. Alderman Lopez is also not living up to his duties given his lack of action on behalf of his constituents. They live under economic duress and police violence as well.

None of alder people expressed concern with understanding the issues underlying the violence. While they complained about property damage, none of them spoke up about the fact that in these neighborhoods, there are more empty storefronts owned by white realtors than there are storefronts owned by people of color. They haven’t remedied the constant divestment in these communities, leaving the residents to fend for themselves without adequate education, resources, or affordable housing. This divestment inevitably paves the way or serves as a precursor to gentrification and the pushing out of Black/Latinx residents as they cannot afford the rising property costs and increasingly feel unwelcome in a space that they’ve called home for multiple generations. They refuse to acknowledge the fact that competition for a scarcity of resources creates the conditions for inter-ethnic conflict. They pretend to not understand that these protests and riots are the direct manifestation of centuries of murder and neglect by the state. They must not see that in

order to stop “utter chaos” there has to be a total shift in the politics and sociality of the people. Lightfoot and the alderpeople of Chicago do not seem to understand that abolition, what these Black and Brown grassroots organizations are working for, is the only way to move forward. Police cannot be reformed. How does one reform an institution whose very founding was based on securing the private property of white men and women, property signifying enslaved Africans?

How do you reform centuries of ingrained antiblackness and white supremacy that are bolstered by the society in which we live, and explicitly taught in institutions? The state’s superstructure is fundamentally maintained through violence and ideology (Althusser 1971:129) at the hands of the police “as an arm of the state [which] reflects the ideological principles of society as the state exists as an expression of society” (Smith 2016). How do you reform police when they are taught from the classroom to the field to target Black and Brown people through racist sociological studies later transformed into policies and police professionalization guides? When police taught to never see or acknowledge the humanity, and are taught that Black people are inherently criminal, how is this addressed? What does reform mean when Black and Brown folks who join these departments are either assimilated into the culture of surveilling and harming Black and Brown bodies or forced out when they confront racist policing?

There can be no reform, because you cannot reform an institution that is doing what it was meant to do all along--protect the rights and property of white citizens, which inevitably means that “order” is maintained by keeping Black communities disenfranchised and out of positions of power that do not serve the white supremacist status quo.

## **Conclusion**

The Chicago Police Department's function since its inception in 1853 has been to protect the private and corporate interests (property) of wealthy businessmen and politicians of the upperclass (Mitrani 2013). From the repression of strikers to the repression of protestors, the function of CPD has never changed, only undergone unsuccessful attempts at reform. Lori Lightfoot, Barack Obama, and alderman Jason Ervin are all a part of the rise of a Black political class that serves as co-conspirators or junior partners in these forms of authoritarian governance that ignore noncarceral solutions proposed by those directly affected by violence and poverty while pushing for more punitive measures of social control and admonishing poor Black and Brown residents for gang violence. Rather than work directly with the people most invested in positive change as their lives depend on it, they continue to fund projects that have a negative impact on these embattled communities. Their disregard for the solutions proposed by the people follows the same pattern of police of the 1970s dismissing the concerns of community control activists who proposed civilian oversight of police operations.

The following chapter, Chapter Two: Sex Work and the City, discusses how sex work and by extension, sex worker activism, serve as a lens through which we can examine the extent of the reach and the effects of the state on Black women, femmes, and queer and trans people of color. By expanding the authority of police, powerbrokers in Chicago have

granted them the license to determine who belongs in what space, and who “looks” criminal, which disproportionately affects Black women and femmes in areas marked as hotspots for the sex trade. However, this lens also provides a look into the various ways sex workers and Black women are combatting the criminalization of their communities and bodies by organizing and caring for each other.

## Chapter Two: The Block is Hot: Black Women, Sex Work, and Policing

*Shortly after turning 19 years old, I was solicited (sexually harassed) by two white police officers on the West Side of Chicago as I walked with my grandmother to the beauty supply store. My grandmother's brick house was less than ten blocks from the historically Puerto Rican Humboldt Park. For as long as I can remember, this area had always been heavily policed. One particular summer day, my grandmother decided she wanted to walk the five short blocks to a beauty supply store. We walked down from her porch, outside the gate, turned left, and walked at a casual pace down the street. I wore capris, a t-shirt, and a bandana over my straightened hair. I held my grandmother's brown hand, helping to support her as she walked.*

*Halfway down the block, two white police officers driving the same direction down the one-way street, slowed down and rolled down their tinted windows. The driver appeared to be in his late 40s and the passenger in his late 20s. I didn't quite hear what they said to us, I just remember smiling nervously and trying to help my grandmother walk faster. The cops directed a question toward her that I did not hear. She smiled, laughed, said something about "my grandbaby," and kept walking. We walked through alleyways and I occasionally saw what I thought was the same police car. As we neared the large parking lot in front of the beauty supply store, the same police car pulled up in front of us, blocking our path. This time, both officers got out. The older officer looked maybe 5'11 and 230 pounds. He wore sunglasses and had a cold, confident smile as he asked what we were doing out here. After we responded that we were going to the store, he asked me which one of them I was interested in. I did and yet did not want to understand the question. The second officer looked nervous. His smile signaled he was uncomfortable, but he said nothing. I was terrified, angry, and embarrassed. I just wanted to get away. I remember my grandmother doing her polite, sick-of-white-people laugh to signal we would be exiting the situation. We never spoke about it. I think, because of her life experiences as a Black woman from the South who grew up in Chicago<sup>21</sup>, she was used to this and it wasn't something she was accustomed to discussing.*

I will never forget the experience of being solicited by white police officers at the age of 19, while I was walking with my elderly grandmother. . This terrible encounter in

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<sup>21</sup> Here I draw attention to the long history of racialized, sexual violence against Black women by white men in the South, as examined in Danielle McGuire's (2010) instrumental text *At The Dark End Of The Street : Black Women, Rape, And Resistance—A New History Of The Civil Rights Movement From Rosa Parks To The Rise Of Black Power*.

my adolescence marked a moment that solidified what it means to be a Black woman:: I am at the mercy of the state, my body is presumed available for public consumption, and I am always deemed “out of place.”<sup>22</sup>

I begin this chapter with my experience of police solicitation—a form of sexual harassment—to demonstrate how Black women’s vulnerability to violence, explicitly sexual violence, is intimately tied to the state. As a Black woman who is also Afro-Puerto Rican, this story takes on added meaning within our discussions of the racialized, sexualized and gendered landscape of policing in the city of Chicago. For Black women—Latina and non-Latina encounters with the state are typically violent, misogynistic, and anti-Black. If the police function as an extension of the state, then we can infer that the practice of policing reflects the ideological beliefs of the state.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the state casts Black women as sexually deviant and therefore solictable and violable. Our experiences with policing reflect this conceptual frame.

In this chapter, I highlight the experiences of Black women and femmes and argue that the Chicago legal system constructs this group as sex workers. In my analysis of the 2018 anti-prostitution solicitation ordinance, I demonstrate how sex worker activism exposes the ways paternalism and the politics of respectability place Black women at risk of violent encounters with police, causing more harm than help. Painted as “deviant” and “criminal” by nature in the eyes of the state, Black women, girls, and femmes are

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<sup>22</sup> See Christen Smith’s (2016) article “Putting Prostitutes in their Place” and Kia Lily Caldwell’s (2007) *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*.

<sup>23</sup> See Althusser’s 1970 essay on the Ideological and Repressive Appartus of the State.

consistently marked as needing to be policed. This means, by extension, that the police often perceive Black women and girls as sexually available and violable; as they did with me that day with my grandmother. Through this pervasive and persistent cognitive association, sex work represents the literal and metaphorical space that defines Black women's place and the limits and possibilities of our rights to the city, including the right to move freely, like walking from our houses to the beauty shop. Any understanding of Black women's experiences with violence in Chicago, particularly experiences with policing, requires an epistemic interpretation that centers sex work as a lived experience in the social imagination because the stereotype of the Black woman sexual deviant informs the politics of policing in the city. I build from ethnographic and auto-ethnographic accounts, and a close reading of city legal statutes and politics to argue that there is a dialectical relationship between sex work that disproportionately impacts Black women in the city of Chicago. This relationship shapes the city's political landscape, policies, legal statutes, and the politics of abolitionist organizing and sex worker activism. Abolitionist organizing and sex worker activism are oppositional, epistemological spaces of counter-hegemonic deviance that challenge the underlying logics of the state - namely anti-Blackness and heteropatriarchy. As such, this organizing is a target of state control and also a space of radical possibility.

This chapter begins with my own experience with police sexual violence and an analysis of the historical and contemporary ways Black women and femmes are constructed as sexually deviant. At the end of this chapter, I explore the intellectual and embodied sensibilities offered by sex work and sex worker activism. There are connections



between the criminalization of Black women, access to public space/the right to the city, police violence and state neglect, and citizenship. In essence, understanding sex work as an epistemological frame also allows us to understand the limits and possibilities of community organizing against violence against Black women.

This chapter highlights sex worker activism as a lens through which we can understand the carceral landscape created by the neoliberal imperative for “law and order.” This imperative relies upon gendered and racialized stereotypes to justify increasingly punitive measures for Black, Brown, queer, trans, and women of color<sup>24</sup> communities. Through my field work, auto-ethnography and analysis of city politics and ordinances, I have come to ask the following questions: What does state protection look like in the lives of these women? What does it mean for a Black alderman to reproduce respectability politics in order to reify the role of the state vis-a-vis surveillance on the Black and Brown bodies and criminalized neighborhoods of the West and South sides of Chicago? What are the interests of the State in policing particular bodies and sexualities, policing informal economies, and even policing social interactions?

### **Paternalism, Policing, and the Anti-Prostitution Loitering Ordinance**

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<sup>24</sup> The 2020 CAASE report also has data regarding the arrests of Asian immigrant sex workers who operate in businesses such as massage parlors. While it is important to note that these women are at-risk of trafficking as well as susceptible to deportation, I do not focus primarily on this group for the purpose of my dissertation as I am concerned with how the ordinance affects outdoor, public spaces.

In June 2018, the anti-prostitution loitering ordinance SO2017-8319 was passed in Chicago. The ordinance gave the police the power to order anyone they deemed suspicious of engaging in “prostitution-related-loitering” –defined as “remaining in any one place under circumstances that would warrant a reasonable person to believe that the purpose or effect of that behavior is to facilitate prostitution”--to leave the area under surveillance for eight hours or face fines or arrest. The areas in question are specific blocks and corners on the South and West sides, in neighborhoods with predominantly poor Black and Brown communities that police and politicians have deemed prostitution “hotspots.” I became aware of this ordinance because of the uproar it caused on Twitter. Black women activists and academics in Chicago were outraged at the criminalization of sex work and sex workers, and the danger the ordinance would present for those who would be the most affected: Black cis and trans women, queer people of color, and gender-nonconforming individuals; in short, historically policed and marginalized communities.<sup>25</sup> This ordinance is more politically complex than it appears due to its origins. It mirrors earlier anti-gang and narcotics-related ordinances that were heavily criticized for promoting racial profiling. In fact, the anti-gang law and anti-loitering Municipal Code § 8-4-015 it mirrors was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1999 for being unconstitutionally vague because it led to the disproportionate surveillance and arrest of Black and Brown residents of Chicago.

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<sup>25</sup> The Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) released a 2020 report titled “Policing and the Enforcement of Prostitution Laws in Chicago” that demonstrated those most commonly arrested for prostitution in Chicago are Black women. They “frequently describe negative interactions with police, often dealing with derogatory comments and attitudes, and sexual misconduct by officers.” <https://www.caase.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-PEOPL-Jan20-v1.3-WithAppx.pdf>

Later that year, then-Mayor Richard M. Daley supported a new version of the anti-gang loitering ordinance meant to adhere to the Supreme Court's guidelines, which remains in effect to this day.

The anti-prostitution ordinance was proposed and headed by Black West Side Alderman Jason Ervin. The new ordinance contains much of the same language as the anti-gang loitering ordinance. The Chicago Tribune quoted Ervin as saying, "who wants to pick up condoms off their lawn in the morning?" In a written statement, Ervin criticized "laissez-faire" policing in his West Side district. He describes the area as plagued by a "constant stream of crime". After Black activists and sex workers called out the ordinance, Ervin released an email stating that the new ordinance "specifically targets traffickers and those purchasing services" and "gives police different tools to address the problem." However, the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) reviewed arrest and ticket records and conducted hours of interviews over 18 months. The results demonstrated that in 2013, out of 1,648 arrests, the prostitute or "seller" was arrested 74% of the time compared to the "John" or the "buyer" who was arrested 25% of the time. In 2017, the data yielded a significant and stark contrast in that the number of arrests dropped by more than half to 734, however, the percentage of "sellers" or prostitutes arrested climbed to 91% compared to the "johns" or "buyers" at 8%.

CAASE also reports that many of the sex workers arrested spoke to CAASE about their mistreatment and regular sexual assault by police officers, some women even stating some police officers are among their regular customers. This data shows that even if we are to consider the charges that police refuse to patrol hotspots and aid in riding the streets

of sex workers, they are still more invested in prosecuting and abusing those who sell sex than those who buy. Ervin's reasons for enforcing the ordinance appear paternalistic as he speaks about his concern for the "well-being" of the neighborhood and its children. Ervin's reasons render sex workers hypervisible, while reducing them to nothing more than criminal transactions, rather than marginalized populations eking out a living in a city with rapidly increasing housing costs and rampant gentrification<sup>26</sup>.

His stance calls into question the gendered, sexualized, racial politics behind the ordinance. The ordinance does not address the root cause it purports to want to address: the disinvestment of the South and West sides that led to school closures and lack of economic development forcing the impoverished into underground economies and trading sex for survival (Ewing 2018). In theory, the law creates the conditions for the state to protect all Chicagoans, particularly the most vulnerable. However, the effects of the ordinance reveal that in fact the law is structurally designed to limit the rights of Black women, women of color, and queer and trans communities, not protect them. By giving the police the authority to determine who has the right to access public space, and basing these restrictions on alleged sexual deviance or sex worker status, the law performatively

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<sup>26</sup> According to the Urban Displacement Project, <https://www.urbandisplacement.org/chicago/chicago-gentrification-and-displacement>, "42% of Chicago neighborhoods experienced a rapid increase in housing costs (an increase above the regional median) between 2000 and 2017;" "More than 200,000 low-income Chicago households (18% of all low-income households) live in low-income neighborhoods at risk of, or already experiencing, gentrification and/or displacement, especially in the southern and western parts of the city;" Additionally, as of 2017, "59% of Chicago's moderate-to-high-income neighborhoods demonstrated risk of or ongoing exclusion of lower-income households, a pattern especially prevalent in the northern part of the city and across its northern and western suburbs. One-third of Chicago's low-income households, or about 400,000 low-income households, live in these potentially or currently exclusive neighborhoods."

criminalizes Black women, women of color, trans and queer people as sex workers, relying on the implicit biases of police officers to define the relationship between criminality, race, gender, socio-economic status by marking bodies according to race/gender/sexuality and their spatial relationship to “hotspots.” The anti-prostitution ordinance also presents another way that Black women become de-facto noncitizens (Caldwell 2007; Alexander 1994). The ordinance reinscribes age-old notions surrounding Black women’s bodies and sexuality that have, and continue, to produce Black women as “out of place” (Gonzalez 2018; Caldwell 2007).

Exactly how do police determine who is a sex worker? Based on my field research with Black women in Chicago, I argue that prevailing stereotypes about Black criminality and hypersexuality mark Black women and queer people of color as sexually available and out of place across the city of Chicago but especially in hotspots, resulting in the assumption that all Black women and queer people of color are potential sex workers and therefore potentially criminally deviant. This marking results in the consistent targeting, arrest, and harassment of Black women and queer people of color at the whim of the police, a constant specter of racialized, gendered and sexualized state terror. Because of the cognitive association between Black and queer women and people of color and sex workers, all are subject to police harassment and potential arrest without much cause beyond being in the wrong body at the wrong place. In heavily policed Black and Brown spaces of Chicago, Black women are constantly exposed to surveillance and interactions with police. I argue that instead of stopping the sex trade or sex trafficking (often conflated by police even as they criminalize the “victims” they purport to help), the city ordinance

increases Black (cis, trans, and queer) women's vulnerabilities to violence and surveillance by the carceral system—a paradox that local activists are bringing to light, particularly sex workers. This chapter examines the impact of this phenomenon through a look at sex worker activism in marginalized communities that experience state surveillance, hyperpolicing, police violence, and urban violence. It draws upon my semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and examination of public data such as arrests of Black and Brown women for solicitation.

### **The Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP)**

*The Chicago skyline is mesmerizing. As I drive down “Lakeshore Drive” from South Chicago’s Hyde Park to the wealthy area of Buena Park, I reflect on the beauty of the landscape. It is early midwestern nightfall in February. The winding expressway frames the lake and downtown like a postcard. There is a cluster of buildings on the left. The lights from the buildings and the Ferris wheel at Navy Pier reflect off the softly crashing waves. The moon looks larger here. It does not seem possible that this is the same Chicago where I grew up: a Chicago plagued by wanton police abuse and intentional structural neglect far away from sights like these.*

The night that I made the drive along Lakeshore, I was headed to my first meeting with Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP)--a nonprofit that advocates for and supports former and current sex workers, run by a combination of sex workers, community activists, and therapists--all of whom are predominantly white. It was an outreach meeting reserved

solely for sex workers and former sex workers, to support mental health and provide a space for sex workers to connect with one another. After exiting the freeway, I turned onto a side street and parked in front of a large building. It was nondescript; just another building among a block full of them. This is Chicago, industrial in every sense of the word: buildings and warehouses make this city what it is; a relic of Chicago's industrial past.

After walking through the front door, I was greeted by a young man who asked me to sign in and pointed me to the meeting room. When I arrived, there were two white women in the room already. They explained that they were therapists there to provide support for the meeting. Once an older, white queer man, and another younger, white woman joined me, we introduced ourselves. I immediately noticed the lack of Black women and other women of color. This was surprising to me given the fact that Black women were the most arrested demographic in Chicago for street-based prostitution. I pondered this as the counselors invited us all to choose a coloring book, markers, and a notebook for journaling and self-reflection. The art provided a way to temper the anxiety I felt while being in such an intimate space where we divulged personal information. We were encouraged to talk about any relevant topic that came to mind and that everything would be kept confidential. The support group occurred monthly and this month there were only three of us. I wondered how many people on average attended the group. I wrote about how I would not be able to come many nights due to lack of childcare. I thought about what it would mean to have a mental health support group that also found a way to provide childcare, the way the Let Us Breathe Collective has, often asking volunteers to help watch over the children who attended events with their parents and guardians. I also

journalled about my thoughts on the drive down, and how beautiful the skyline is, and how you'd never know that *"Chicago is a city embroiled in conflict; that Black women and girls are increasingly disappearing while no one but Black women and girls notice or care. No one cares but us. There are even whispers of a serial killer on the loose, targeting Black women and girls..."*

When the free-write was over, we were asked to speak. I introduced myself as a former (exotic) dancer and current Ph.D. candidate. Honestly, I was somewhat concerned about what their reaction would be to me being a graduate student interested in studying the conditions for Black women in Chicago, especially in light of the recent anti-sex worker ordinance. Would they object to my presence, as a scholar? Would I be seen as an interloper looking to mine or extract data? I was also worried about what it would mean to write this story in my dissertation. It was one thing to be open in a support group, and another thing entirely to be open on a page, for all the world to see and read. The meeting attendees welcomed me immediately. After my introduction, I noticed a shift in both bodies and the energy in the room: I could see the curiosity in everyone's eyes as they focused on me. I was asked questions like "what is it like, being a sex worker in grad school?" As well as, "are you out?" *Out*. I told them, "no, I'm not out. It's already hard enough being a Black single mom in academia." At that time, I didn't know a single scholar that was *Out* and who wrote about it in their work.

The counselors then went on to talk to me about what that meant for my mental health, to feel isolated and alone. These were things I couldn't discuss with family and friends. This was the first support group of its kind that I had ever attended or heard of. I



couldn't afford to be vulnerable. Being vulnerable is dangerous. My work is deeply personal. It is also political.

It feels voyeuristic in many ways, speaking to an outside group, strangers in every sense of the word. I would have felt more comfortable sharing with other Black women. How could I impress upon them what it meant to be a Black woman in Chicago, especially when that Blackness is frequently reinscribed violently, “not as an identity but as a social relationality born of bodily encounters” (Smith 2013: 110; Hartman, 1997) with police officers and white men and women? I began to talk about my experiences with police, my research on Black women's experiences with police, the missing and murdered Black women and girls that the city continued to ignore and how social media was playing a role in Black and Brown residents trying to keep their own communities safe.

I also wondered aloud: with the lack of attention and leads on the missing and murdered Black women, what if it was the work of a serial killer, a serial killer who happened to be a cop? The young woman to my left, Codi, thought so as well. Codi is a sex worker and co-founder of Chicago SWOP; she became my closest contact in SWOP. We began a dialogue around what it meant that missing Black women and girls were being invisibilized, how we shared a mutual distrust of (read: hatred) cops and what they do to vulnerable communities, and how being a former sex worker and academic placed me in a position to examine it all. Overall, the session was interesting, informative, and provided some relief. I say some because my identity and body within that space would not allow me to ever fully relax, or maybe I should say, the whiteness of the space put me at unease. There was always a sense of balancing how much I said--how much I gave within the

space--so that the conversation did not ever take on the natural sort of flow that I know it would have had I been amongst Black women and non-men. After this session, I began to regularly attend SWOP's monthly board and member meetings and volunteer weekly to provide outreach on the Westside of Chicago in East Garfield Park and Boystown. These were two areas known for street-based sex workers. East Garfield is a predominantly Black neighborhood, while Boystown<sup>27</sup> is home to one of the largest LGBTQ populations in the Midwest.

### **When is a Hoe<sup>28</sup> Not A Hoe?**

In order to understand the danger of the anti-sex worker ordinance in Chicago, it is important to understand how race, gender, sexuality, class, and geography are intertwined. The dialogic relationship between race, gender, sexuality, class, and geography is explored in Christen Smith's 2013 article "Putting Prostitutes in Their Place Black Women, Social Violence, and the Brazilian Case of Sirlei Carvalho." Smith writes about instances of physical violence by white men in Brazil that mark all Black women as sex workers; it is through scripts of Blackness in the Brazilian popular imaginary that portray Black women as prostitutes and outside the moral order, that the motivation and justification for violence against Black women simultaneously reflect and mark the Black femaleness of subjects.

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<sup>27</sup> Residents of the area petitioned to change the moniker of "Boystown" to "Northalsted: Chicago's Proudest Neighborhood" as they stated the original name felt exclusionary to non-men and cited instances of sexism, transphobia, and misogyny, especially toward Black trans women and trans women of color. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/09/28/chicago-boystown-lgbtq-neighborhood-changes-nickname/3568445001/>

<sup>28</sup> A Black colloquialism and abbreviation for the word "whore." Also spelled as "ho."

Drawing from Saidiya Hartman, Smith explains that such violent social encounters are a way of disciplining the Black body, which “is essential to maintaining the racial social order, and the givenness of blackness is what requires the performance of disciplining acts. Social roles, race, gender, sexuality, and place do not simply coincide in society because of historical and social constructions; rather, the maintenance of this order demands daily enactments of disciplining, from the coercive and subtle to the overtly physical” (110). As Smith concludes, the violent attack against the domestic worker Sirlei Carvalho was an act of boundary making.

Designating areas of Chicago, specifically areas that are poor and nonwhite, as “hotspots” for crime legally solidifies the heteropatriarchal racial social order that views Black people and places as criminal, hypersexual, and deviant in the popular imaginary of Chicago’s society. Violent (and potentially violent) encounters with the police patrolling these areas are key to creating and maintaining what Blackness is and where it does or does not belong.

During the course of my research, I engaged in conversations on Facebook within groups for women of color in Chicago. I was able to virtually speak with women in various neighborhoods across the city. When I asked what their experiences were like as Black women living in Chicago, Maegan, a Black woman in her 30s provided three specific instances where she had been racially profiled as a sex worker. She stated, “I’ve been confused with being a sex worker several times when I’ve made late night runs in Wicker Park.” She went on: “A white woman in a Walgreens parking lot got really aggressive with me and asked me what I was doing out here with my white boyfriend...A white frat boy

walked up to me and simply said: ‘I’ll pay you.’” She recounts another time that she was walking when “cops pulled over in front of me, blocking my path. Took my ID and forced me to get in their car. These three things didn’t happen all in the same night. Doesn’t happen anymore now that I’ve moved out of Wicker Park!” Her clarification that these incidents didn’t occur over the course of one night indicates the pervasive and constant surveillance of Black womanhood. These encounters, like Carvalho’s, are also acts of boundary making and racial-gendered disciplining. Megan’s Blackness marked her as out of place, available for public consumption, and criminal.

Navigating Chicago as a Black woman requires an intimate geopolitical knowledge of the city and a daily strategy for circumventing danger. Maegan moved out of Wicker Park, a white, gentrified area on the North Side of Chicago, directly east of Humboldt Park. Wicker Park was once home to working-class Puerto Rican and African American communities. Now, it is a yuppie area that polices people of color. A Black joke about gentrification is that you can tell a neighborhood is in the process of gentrification when you see white people jogging and IS gentrified when white women feel safe enough to run alone at night. For Maegan, being out at night gave white people cause to criminalize her. Another Black woman I spoke with, Deja, 22 years old, stated that in order to keep herself safe when she navigates the city, she changes her daily routine: “I have changed the routes I walk because I know a man or men will try to holler at me. I have avoided certain people and places because they have harassed me or touched me inappropriately in the past.” Cori, another Black woman in her 20s, stated that she was solicited in Chicago “off Western and Roosevelt” (the Westside of Chicago). Other women wrote about their experiences of being

profiled while abroad. These racial antagonisms serve as (self) disciplining acts that not only inscribe Blackness onto the body but also produce a racialized topography that dictates how Black bodies navigate space (Smith 2013; Williams 2013; McKittrick 2006). These societal scripts continuously reinforce one another even as they are supported by the state itself.

These stories allude to historical processes of the territorialization and sexualization of Black women's bodies. In order to understand the historical connection between black women's bodies and policing, I turn to the foundational work of Hortense Spillers (1987): "Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name... I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth." Spillers refers here to the plethora of derogatory terms that U.S. culture has used to define Black women historically, and the ways that these stereotypes have come to stand in for Black women in the popular imagination. Spillers' text responds to the problematic discourses of identity that dominated the political landscape of the 1960s and 1970s. Through an examination of Daniel Moynihan's book *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, commonly referred to as the Moynihan Report, and historical analysis of the slave trade, she analyzes the pathology of the Black family.

Overall, the text points to race and psychoanalysis, histories of enslavement, ideas of family structure, and the entangled formations of race and gender in the U.S. When Spillers writes about the weight of naming, she describes how everyday language and

terminology are deeply, historically embedded in the psyche of the United States. The Black woman's identity is inextricably linked to the formation of the nation in every aspect.

Spillers goes on to write that the names ascribed to Black women:

"...are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property plus. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made in excess over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness," (67).

We (Black women) are in a constant battle with the autonomy of naming and being named. As Black women and Black queer people, we are always already marked, and yet because we do not passively accept this violence, Spillers uses the word "agents." There is also the preoccupation with the need to "come clean," through which I read different meanings. For the public, Black women represent (as will be discussed in chapter two) criminality, immorality, and lasciviousness— "signifying property plus"; however, where there exists the public, there is also a "private place." This private sphere serves as the place where Black women can "strip down," shedding the imposed layers—an alternative way to come clean. The power of naming in the face of domination and erasure is apparent in the phrase "speak a truer word concerning myself" (69). The last six words in the preceding sentence can also be interpreted to include Black spatial practices that oppose the violence of the state. In these spaces, Black women are who they want to be, with the freedom to name themselves, to simply *be*, and share this with their community. These words can

speak to the autonomy of creating spaces that serve the needs of those who occupy them. The imagery of property and this notion of soiled bodies speaks to the transnational experiences of Black women being commodified for public sexual consumption (Maynard 2017; Garcia-Pena 2016; Smith 2013; Caldwell 2007) and the preoccupation with cleanliness and disease being projected onto the bodies of sex workers.

Spillers outlines four psychological effects of the “theft of the body,” which occur within a regime of captivity, in this case, slavery: self as sensuality, self as object, self as “other,” and physical powerlessness. All four of these details are complimentary, for as embodying “sensuality,” the Black is opposed to reason and therefore cannot take part as a citizen or even announce their status as a human being. Because the Black is a sensual being, they are consistently pushed into being the object to the white subject, and deprived of reason, must accept their being as property. Self as “other” and self as “powerless” are more-or-less reiterations of this theme.

This hypersexualization of the black body stems from “socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood” (Collins 2002, 266). One image, in particular, is the Jezebel trope which Collins defines as “whore or sexually aggressive” that originated in slavery to “provide a rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by Black slave women.” These images persist today in varying forms and are used as justifications by the state to abuse black women. Black women's bodies are always viewed as or perceived as available for consumption by others, always performing erotic labor, and always criminalized even as they are being objectified. As Christen Smith (2013) writes: “The idea that prostitutes’ bodies are always already violable is ingrained in the

popular imagination, and at least since the colonial period it has also been intensely tied to race. At the height of nineteenth-century eugenics, the body of the prostitute was associated with health hazards and degeneracy, and the black female body was considered the epitome of the sexually deviant (Gilman & Gilman 1985; McClintock, 1995)” (111-112).

These narratives beg the question, how can we be sure that police can effectively carry out the law when they already are prone to racially profiling and policing certain bodies? The “legibility” of our bodies, however, changes from place to place. Here I return to Jason Ervin’s comment about condoms on the lawn (in his opinion) serving as the burden of proof that only sex workers carry condoms, or that the condom could only have come from a sex worker engaged in public sex. What then, might the condom represent in this situation? What distinguishes “civilians” from sex workers in this context? Is it carrying a certain amount of condoms and being in specific areas?

## **EAST GARFIELD PARK**

SWOP’s van sat on a one-way street in East Garfield Park, next to a liquor store. It took me a little over 30 minutes to arrive at East Garfield Park, a predominantly Black neighborhood with approximately 19 thousand residents, just a few blocks south of the (historically) Puerto Rican neighborhood called Humboldt Park (where I was from), on Chicago’s West Side. As I drove down Sacramento street, I took stock of how run-down the area was. *This is like almost every other neighborhood in Chicago where poor Black and Brown people live*, I thought. This area was a lot like many poor Black areas in that



income inequality and constant resource disinvestment left the area vulnerable to slumlords that rarely fixed rental housing, lined with abandoned and boarded-up buildings, eventual gentrification, and constant police surveillance. I drove past a church where a long line of the houseless was steadily growing. I turned left, made another left, and parked on the side opposite the van. It was still daylight outside at 6:15 pm, and probably would be for another hour. Spring was lengthening the daylight hours, as evidenced by the children still playing outside. This was an area I had never been to before; my siblings and cousins never ventured far from the blocks we were familiar with as Children in Chicago because we knew that this could be dangerous. For as much as police surveilled Black neighborhoods, so too, did the residents for their own safety. SWOP set up a plastic folding table fifteen feet from both the corner and alleyway. This was to deter the cops from harassing anyone who came to visit the table as well as to keep a safe distance from the locales where working girls liked to solicit. If we set up a table too near the workers, it would put them in danger of being arrested by police. According to the women who canvassed, the police actually hated SWOP and what they did in these areas, and from time to time they harassed SWOP members or the folks visiting the table.

Codi had been setting up here for years, and the residents knew her. The rest of us, however, were new. The residents of East Garfield Park were very cautious about their interaction with SWOP, even asking all six of us why we volunteer there and “what is [our] motivation?” The traffic at the table was a mixture of folks experiencing houselessness, residents in the area, and polite kids who came for the hot chocolate and snacks. The resources SWOP offered were various types of prophylactics, lubes, injectable Narcan

(SWOP volunteers are trained on the administration of Narcan), fresh needles with yellow cards to signify that the individual has been trained in giving aid (a way to prevent arrest on charges of “possession of drug paraphernalia”), a sharps biohazard box to dispose of used needles, and pamphlets on SWOP and other community organizations. Police watched SWOP and residents of the area with what can only be described as an obvious mixture of amusement, disdain, mistrust, and caution on their faces. They treated the people here as if they were wild animals that would attack with no warning. Their sporadic interactions with the kids in the area reminded me of movie scenes about war in the Middle East where soldiers half-heartedly played with little brown children, with the threat of violence in the back of their minds at all times. It made my skin crawl and I couldn’t hide the visible contempt on my face. I could only think “at what age do they stop thinking these kids are cute, see violent adult criminals, and start shooting them?”

One Thursday in April, while performing outreach, the residents were extremely agitated and vocal about an arrest occurring on the next block over. As they ran to see what was happening, no less than 30 squad cars sped recklessly into the area. From what the neighborhood was saying, they arrested a young Black woman, who fought back, and that led to this militaristic show of force they now displayed. I walked over with another SWOP member, Elysia, to see what this potentially deadly situation was about. Elysia was clearly upset, and I began to film with my phone by placing it in my pocket to avoid any potentially violent encounter with the police.<sup>29</sup> We remarked on how ridiculous it was to have this

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<sup>29</sup> In *American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois v. Alvarez*, 679 F.3d 583 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2012), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) challenged the original Illinois Eavesdropping statute that made filming officers in public without their consent a felony punishable by up to 15 years in prison. While this statute was

many cars out for one woman, and how the cops' aggressive behavior and disregard for public safety were just a few of the many reasons our communities don't trust the police. Elysia's anger was radiating from her body, she loudly proclaimed: "they would NEVER do this shit up north!"

A white cop with a bullet-proof vest and obvious anger issues rushed Elysia. "What did you say?!" She turned barely a second before the cop tried to bump into her with his chest in order to intimidate her, as he towered over her much-smaller, brown frame. "I don't fucking talk to cops," she said as she walked away. The same agitated cop that had just tried not only to get in her face but to actually knock her down with his body, retorted "up north they don't act like SAVAGES!" All of this was too much for me, and I yelled out "nice racist ass rhetoric there. Savages? Like you are?" He and another cop said, "how's that racist?!" I replied, "would you like decades' worth of literature on the fucking subject? I got time." The two shook their heads in disgust and walked back to their squad car, parked on someone's lawn. A Black cop that had been witness to the entire scene made a comment along the lines of "ya'll always talking shit." I rolled my eyes, wondering how much self-hate he had to swallow to be what he is now. I didn't reply because of multiple, previous experiences with Black cops being even more violent than white cops in an effort to prove themselves to their colleagues. As cultural anthropologist Kia Lilly Caldwell points out in *Negras in Brazil: Re-Envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*, diasporic anthropologists are often "subjected to many of the same racialized and gendered

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overturned, it does not guarantee protection against police retaliation insofar as one must prove police did not have "probable cause" to arrest them.

discourses and practices that we set out to examine in our research” (2007, xxii). I knew it was my immense anger at the fact that this large white cop had tried to harm a woman of color for speaking out that caused me to respond, endangering myself as well.

Elysia identifies as Puerto Rican but did not specify a race. She is visibly brown-skinned with loose curls. In that instant, I wondered if she was aware of how her body was read and racialized, especially next to mine, in an all Black area. I wondered if she was aware of how historical processes of domination, particularly around slavery, have ungendered (Spillers 1987) and masculinized Black women in society’s imaginary, to the point that state-sanctioned violence against us is now the norm. Righteous anger can get you killed. Because of dangerous encounters like these, I am forced to constantly be aware of where I am and who I am around. My positionality as “researcher” means nothing when I am a Black woman that carries little to nothing in the way of social or financial capital, and I am just as susceptible to state violence. The police did not pause to ask Elysia and I if we were college-educated, or even if we were there in a social outreach capacity. It did not matter to them either way. We were a threat, by virtue of being Black women who dared to challenge their authority and methods. I walked back to the SWOP van, while residents asked me what happened. I told them “another day of police fucking with Black people.” They all nodded and responded with a mixture of knowing smiles or head shakes. It was business as usual.

### **The Track: Cookies and Condoms**

In May of 2019, Codi and I met near West Garfield street to provide outreach to street-based sex workers in the area. This area would be called a “hotspot” by police and alderman Ervin. After parking in a vacant lot, I hopped into the passenger side of the SWOP van. “So, pretty much the bulk of arrests in the past six months have been in this half-mile stretch on fifth avenue and they're happening at all times of the day. So, I figured we’d drive around for a little bit, if we see folks, we can give them some [condoms and lube]. I have coffee and chocolate chip cookies and stuff. All of [the arrests in this area] are for prostitution or solicitation for prostitution and all of them are women who are being arrested.” We begin a conversation on claims that Chicago has shifted to helping sex workers by penalizing Johns instead of sex workers.

The area Codi took me to canvas was an industrial area. Full of warehouses and train yards, it was open, yet secluded enough for privacy; semi-trucks lined one side of the street. This was the “track:” an area where sex workers looked for “Tricks” and/or “Johns.” Codi pointed out a hotel that many sex workers used for business, an area she has canvassed before. She also told me how in the past, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center used to rent a room at the same hotel once a month and offer free STD/HIV testing services. While we were there, we noticed a light, but constant police presence during the late afternoon. As we drove around in the white van with large SWOP decals, Codi spotted a sex worker. The woman was Black, possibly in her 30’s, wearing a pink hoodie, fitted leggings, and pink sneakers. Nothing about her clothing looked “sexy” or what media and society would imagine it should be: mini-skirt and spaghetti strap top with high heels. It made me aware of how due to the location being a “known hot-spot” any Black woman walking in this area

could automatically be presumed to be a sex worker. We attempted to pull over to hand out SWOP's bags full of condoms and pamphlets, but the woman was wary of us (rightfully so), so we did not get a chance to speak with her.

We continued to circle the same five-block radius while speaking about the advocacy agencies in Chicago that inevitably do more harm to sex workers than help. After driving around for a little over two hours, we saw four younger Black women, three white women (two younger, one possibly in her 40's), and two cops patrolling the area. As we passed by one cop car, the officer gave us a look that can only be described as menacing. If the state professes to want to help these populations, why were they so averse to the on-the-ground outreach work SWOP does? I surmised part of their slight came from the fact that some of SWOP's members were sex workers themselves, and sex workers were deemed a group unworthy of help, which contradicts everything politicians, elected officials, and the police department stated when supporting the new ordinance. While musing over this, Codi told me about a meeting she had the day before at an event on sex work and sex trafficking. She met with the head of an organization that provides various resources to women in sex work. According to Codi, the white woman she spoke with was already familiar with her and the work she does. She recalls "the lady was like 'yes, I know who you are'" with malice, and as the conversation continued, she made disparaging remarks about sex workers, at one point even stating that these are "women with needles hanging out of their necks." This image is not only fabricated and exaggerated but demonizing as well. The imagery and language reminded me of stories about and disdain

for “crack-whores” and “heroin addicts;” I knew that she would rather penalize the women in these trades rather than help them.

This conversation recalled an event I attended a few months earlier when I had first arrived in Chicago. DePaul College of Law’s Combating Sex Trafficking 2019 Summit held a symposium titled: “Eliminating Sex Trafficking in a Digital Age: with a Chicago Focus.” The research was presented by an older white woman and those on the panel were majority white: three cops (an older white male, a middle-aged Latina, and a Black male), an advocacy group represented by white women, and a survivor of trafficking: a young, pretty, white woman. The event was problematic in more ways than one. The panelists, along with the main speaker, often conflated sex work and sex trafficking and brought no racial, gender, sexuality, age, or class analysis to the conversation. She had bland statistics on how many women in Chicago are being trafficked and the cops told their own stories about working in this area. The Q&A was heavily moderated. She went through the note cards audience members passed back and decided which questions to answer. I marked my card in a specific way so that I would visually see when she picked it up and read it. She did pick it up, and after remarking “wow, these are a lot of questions,” she passed on it and picked up a card that asked something like “how do we help stop sex-trafficking?”

My questions about whether or not she had considered a racialized and classed analysis about the connections between sex trafficking, economic inequality, and disparity in police response to missing Black women and girls, went unheeded. Nor did she want to answer why there appeared to be a general conflation between sex work and sex trafficking, particularly among those in law enforcement as well as in the work she presented that day.

This conflation bleeds into harmful or ineffective policies created to address sex work. According to the National Crime Information Center, of the 609,275 individuals who were reported missing in the United States last year, 205,802 were Black. Those statistics include 164,769 African Americans under the age of 21. The NCIC also reports that 90 percent of these cases are “purged,” which means that due to being reported as “resolved” in some manner, they are removed from the record. The NCIC categorized 95.23 percent of entries as runaways; 0.84 percent as abducted by a non-custodial parent; 0.11 percent as abducted by a stranger; and 3.82 percent as missing adults. There is a pattern to Black girls who are reported missing by family or guardians being classified as “runaways” by law enforcement, and no amber alert being put out. The problem with labeling Black girls “runaways” is that it erases or ignores how they may be being harmed by systems of exploitation and victimization. Secondly, it speaks to stereotypical narratives that sexualize youth and mark them as immoral, loose, and unworthy of concern or care. I left upset and nonplussed. I should have expected this. No one cares about missing Black women and girls. No one cares that they could be and are being trafficked. No one cares unless there is a pretty, young white girl speaking about how she was rescued from sex slavery and is now able to live a safe, fulfilling life. If only Black women and girls had that same option.

Codi’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “Prostitution arrests, have now become ‘hitchhiking’ arrests,” she stated matter-of-factly. If they arrest for hitchhiking, while less condemning on record than prostitution, it can be counter-productive for those who are sex workers and do need help. It prevents them from being able to access resources offered to women stopped on solicitation/prostitution charges. As Codi and I discussed, hitchhiking



charges could easily be loosely applied to women waiting for the bus, rideshares, or many other situations, such as being catcalled. These weren't protections for the already marginalized, vulnerable, and criminalized; they were meant to "clean up" Chicago's streets.

## **Conclusion**

As slavery has defined Black womanhood as hypersexual, deviant, and unclean, ultimately tied to that of the prostitute--I argue that this imagery persists today and informs approaches to law and order in Chicago. Understanding this, then, requires us to acknowledge how the anti-sex work ordinance disciplines *all* Black feminine and genderqueer bodies as outside the social contract (and thus at the margins of society). It necessitates a framework that highlights sex work and sex worker activism as an integral part of the fight against heteropatriarchal, neoliberal policies and attitudes that create and perpetuate a carceral landscape in Chicago. Such a framework would be put to better use by those advocates who work to decriminalize sex work. Black women's geographies are in a constant state of displacement<sup>1</sup> globally. For this reason, Black feminist ethnographers and geographers explain Black women's relationship to the state and citizenship as Black women's exclusion from the nation. This exclusion was visible in the conversation on sex trafficking at the DePaul symposium I attended and is visible in the policing of specific areas as "high crime." Policing (by both civilians and officials) functions as a tool that is important to the disciplining of Black women's bodies as Black, as criminal, and violable. In determining who looks like a prostitute, Black women who work odd hours, or who may

be coming home late after being out, are vulnerable to police suspicions, and possible abuse, and may even be prevented from going home, unable to access the spaces they live in. Sex work as a lens—specifically in the urban context and with a focus on the work and activism of Black, queer and trans communities—allows us to make the connections between racialized, gendered, and classed carceral logics of the neoliberal state and how the most marginalized and vulnerable are those best poised to combat them.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> McKittrick, K. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women's Cartographies of Struggle*

### Chapter 3: Remembering a Praxis of Mothering and Care in Community

#### *Mothering in the field*

*Joaquin's curls framed his tan face, drawing attention to his smile. He was excitedly describing his favorite Roblox game to a Black woman and member of the Let Us Breathe Collective, the organization I was currently working with for my dissertation. I half-watched him from the porch stoop where I sat talking with a Black trans woman who frequented the repurposed house-turned-activist space on the South Side of Chicago. Soft music played in the background, complimenting the sizzle of meat and vegetables on the grill. It was summer. Joaquin had just turned seven years old a couple of weeks before. We had become regular visitors to the "Breathing Room," where I learned more about the Let Us Breathe Collective, its members, and its importance to the "Back of the Yards" community. I brought him along because it is important to me that my Afro-Puerto Rican and Chicano son be present in Black, queer, radical feminist spaces where he sees Black, queer womyn engaged in liberatory struggle. I also cannot afford childcare.*

As a Black Latina, single mother in academia, I depend on limited funding from fellowships that I must supplement with a second or even third job. Economic precarity is not only a constant but is somehow treated or seen as a rite of passage for students. We are

expected to search and apply for grants and fellowships while also working multiple jobs to survive. This has meant that either my son accompanies me on all of my research outings, or I do not go at all. For many Black women and Black people who mother or nurture, our social status challenges what it means to be in the field and whether or not one ever actually enters or leaves the field. Our ability to lean into Black communities and spaces, in ways white bodies cannot, pushes us to refuse the violence of abstraction, essentialization, and negation. Due to my positionality as researcher, graduate student, and my familial and personal connections with Chicago, I reject the notion of “objectivity” as these “refusals” — ethnographic, bureaucratic, kinship — generate disruptive potentialities that allow for the rupturing of what is considered canonical, traditional or methodological.

In many ways, *the ethnographer* and the tools of ethnography — “the critical anthropological project” — were imagined by and for white men (Harrison 2011, 9; Berry et. al, 2017). The logic of “traditional” or “mainstream” ethnography excludes and rejects Black mothers and those who mother as we/they are unable to abandon home/child(ren)/responsibilities to go “to the field” to conduct research (Harrison 1991). Traditional ethnography was not developed with the thought of those who shoulder the bulk of familial responsibility in mind, as it does not consider those who cannot shift familial care responsibilities to their partners and/or extended family. The need for improvised mothering factors into where I work, how often I go, how I build community ties, and how I express my political commitments. While I recognize that ethnography shows up in different ways across many different fields of study, some of the established “best practices” include participant observation, living alongside interlocutors for an

extended amount of time, interviews, and writing thick analytical and descriptive field notes. Generally speaking, it is an individualistic rite of passage where the researcher is supposed to go out to “the field” and live, be present, observe, and participate.

Black women and those who mother have always had to be strategic in the work we take on and perform because the methods proffered by the Western academy were never meant for us. Our interventions in ethnography come in the form of refusing the contours of traditional ethnography, not only in theoretical terms, but via the actual “practice”<sup>31</sup> of ethnography (Hurstun 1935; Hurstun 1938; Harrison 1991; Cox 2015; McClaurin 2001; Gaunt 2004). Patricia Hill Collins highlights how an “ethic of caring” is necessary if we are to undo ‘Eurocentric masculinist’ epistemologies through the centering of Black women’s concrete experiences, emotions, and knowledges (1990, 765). Mothering (and communal mothering-other mothering) in the field is a refusal and practice born out of intentional care and community-building as well as a response to the patriarchal and capitalist limitations under which we live and work. It is an investment in one another — one that did not begin with the academy and extends far beyond its reach.

I write this to illuminate the ways my financial limitations in the field required me to be innovative when collecting data, as I divided my attention between being present in the work and also caring for my young son. There were many times when I was only able to collect ethnographic data thanks to the community of Black women and femmes

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<sup>31</sup> And by “practice,” we mean a Black Feminist one that “turns our attention to the ‘politics of the everyday,’ the places where the subject lives as theorist, consumer, grocery shopper, got-to-pick-up-the-mail-now, let’s go to the bank” (Williamson 8).

who created welcoming spaces with communal childcare. In this chapter, I argue that communal mothering and collective care directly challenge and undermine the underlying logics of the nation-state apparatus—namely patriarchy and antiblackness. In this way, I situate the communal and collective labor of mothering and care as sites for reproductive justice.

This intervention is all the more timely, given the recent reversal of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States. Under white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy, reproduction is always in service of the state (Althusser 1970). This is apparent in the legacies of slavery and colonialism that persist today. The retrenchment of *Roe v. Wade* once again returns power to the state to make decisions over birthing people's bodies. We know that this will negatively and disproportionately affect Black women, girls and femmes.

Black radical mothering emerges from a diasporic legacy of struggle and agency that traverses time and space. From enslavement to contemporary state-sanctioned violence, including but not limited to police violence, Black mothers and those-who-mother have done so under the duress of ongoing, antiblack terror. This chapter uses an autoethnographic lens to demonstrate the complexities and challenges of Black motherhood and “mothering in the field” in Chicago, Illinois as an Afro-Puerto Rican graduate student. Through an exploration of the everyday connections, chance encounters, and intimate moments between Black working-class women, this chapter offers insights into mothering as a “site of political struggle animated by the emotional labor of pain and terror” (Davis 2016) and demonstrates that Black motherhood and mother-work are also sites of radical possibility. These radical possibilities exist in the Black, queer feminist

praxes that involve: Black women-led, community-wide rallying behind mothers who have lost children, the creation of fictive kinships, and the ways Black mothers, other-mothers, and communal mothering challenge the state's construction of Black motherhood as deviant.

### **Black Motherhood and Reproductive Justice**

State violence is a reproductive justice issue (Dorothy Roberts 1997, 2001, 2022; Dean Spade 2011, 2022; Caldwell 2017). Abolitionists Miriam Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie co-founded the Interrupting Criminalization Collective in order to “interrupt and end the growing criminalization and incarceration of women, girls, trans, and gender nonconforming people of color for criminalized acts related to public order, poverty, child welfare, drug use, survival and self-defense, including criminalization and incarceration of survivors of violence.” I draw the following analysis of reproductive justice and anti-police movements from the article “Abortion Decriminalization is Part of the Larger Struggle Against Policing and Criminalization: How Our Movements Can Organize in Solidarity With Each Other” (Thomas et al 2022). Through collaboration, the Interrupting Criminalization Coalition and Beyond do No Harm Coalition present a compelling analysis of how abortion criminalization is intimately connected to movements to end police violence and criminalization. They point out that the “expanding surveillance and criminalization of mutual aid, self-managed care, and bodily autonomy, and the growing attempts to criminalize pregnant people, parents, and health care providers have far-

reaching ramifications beyond abortion criminalization” that affects entire communities, not just individuals. They urge us to resist this intrusion on birthing people’s bodies<sup>32</sup> (1).

They center their analysis around restrictive bills that have been proposed and passed, specifically the Texas law (SB8) that bans abortion after six weeks and also deputizes civilians to police each other’s reproductive decisions. These laws follow in a well-established history of criminalizing bodily autonomy, especially for Black, Indigenous, migrant, disabled, queer, and trans people, and people with low incomes who will bear the brunt of the effects of anti-abortion legislation. I draw attention to the fact that the Texas abortion ban deputizes community members, thereby making them an extension of the carceral state by giving them the right to sue clinics, providers, or people who assist in helping their loved ones get access to abortion care. Not only does this make access to clinical care nearly impossible, but it also criminalizes people who engage in or assist with self-managed care. As these communities are already forced to live under the scrutiny and pressure of high levels of criminalization and surveillance, this law exacerbates an already precarious issue.

As the Collectives point out, “[a]bortion criminalization is yet another way of increasing the surveillance of our bodies, relationships, autonomy, and mutual aid—widening the net of criminalization, and potentially legitimizing other new forms and means of criminalization” (4). As more and more examples of white civilians harassing Black men, women, and children by policing them goes viral, it is easy to surmise how the

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<sup>32</sup> I use the term “birthing people” in recognition of those who have the capacity to give birth but do not identify as women.



legal codification of policing bodily autonomy is more than just a “slippery slope,” but a full-on landslide that will lead to more than just violent encounters. These collectives make it clear that in order to make progress against carceral logics and criminalization, it is imperative that “broaden and deepen our collective analysis of the culture of punishment that makes such criminalizing legislation possible, following the lead of Black and Indigenous women, women of color, and trans reproductive justice activists who have made critical connections between multiple movements” (4).

What is autonomous mothering for Black people who mother, nurture and create life? On the one hand, there is an invisibilization of forms of mothering outside of biological reproduction. On the other there is a lack of autonomy afforded to Black mothering. There is a dialectical relationship between [biological] reproduction and state violence whereby the womb-space is territorialized, rendering it state property. This in turn situates Black people who mother and perform care work as vulnerable to different forms of surveillance and social control.

Black women in Chicago have developed their own analysis of how race, class, gender, and sexuality inform mothering, based not only on their own personal experiences but also on the stories of other Black women and girls who have experienced violence and loss due to the actions of “individuals as well as by state-operated systems of domination” (Richie 2012, 2). I weave together these women’s stories alongside my own to situate the personal in the political and demonstrate how this dynamic informs the strategies of survival and mothering taken up by Black women. How can we understand, honor, and have

compassion for the ways in which the afterlife of slavery<sup>33</sup> has forced Black women and those who mother to be strategic in how they mother, as well as expand the idea of mothering in the Black community considering the ways slavery and antiblackness have forced Black people to create alternative forms of kinship? Especially when slavery troubled gender (Spillers 1987)? As a feminist ethnographer<sup>34</sup> and researcher, Black study requires more than just observation and abstraction, but a commitment to people, and/or a cause. As a researcher who is also a Black-Puerto Rican mother and graduate student born in Chicago, the connections fostered within these organizations and women seeking liberation and an end to state-sponsored Black death, go far beyond any notions of academic extractivism. I am invested in Black women's experiences in Chicago not only because they reflect my own, but because they also include those of my family members.

*I was born in Chicago. The memories I have cycle between living in apartments on the South Side and then in my grandmother's house on the West Side of Chicago. My earliest memory of loss is when I was barely six years old. My grandmother's home in the Humboldt Park community was the usual gathering place for family visits. One of many cousins, my favorite cousin Dorian would pinch my cheeks whenever he came to visit. I would sit with him and watch as he, my eldest brother, and our other cousins played Atari in the basement rooms I shared with my mom and siblings. Then one day, he never came*

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<sup>33</sup> The "racial calculus" resulting from the afterlife of slavery--the "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman 2008, 6).

<sup>34</sup> Davis and Craven (2016) provide a working definition of feminist ethnography in their edited text *Feminist Ethnography : Thinking through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities*.

*back to pinch my cheeks and laugh. The next time I would see him, he would look like a wax version of his former self—not the happy, smiling, 14 year-old boy I looked up to and adored. I remember telling my mother that Dorian didn’t look like himself, and she cried as she led me away from the casket. In the following days and weeks, it seemed to me as if my mother cried at random moments and so did my aunts. The once warm and lively house took on an eerie silence, like a mausoleum. I don’t know if my aunts and uncle spoke to each other about the grief they felt in my cousin’s absence. I don’t remember seeing Dorian’s mother, my aunt Marilyn, much during that time. As an adult, I often wondered if her struggle with addiction worsened after Dorian was murdered. I also wondered how she felt and how she coped; I also thought about how my grandmother coped after losing her son, one of my uncles (only 5 years prior to Dorian’s murder) to what appeared to be suicide.*

After this loss, my mother moved us all an hour and a half away to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to a city she hoped would offer more opportunities and less danger. The women of my family know loss; they have also experienced the lived anxieties produced by the fear of threat while mothering. Dana-Ain Davis (2016) illuminates these anxieties when she writes: “[t]o be sure Black mothering can be sorrowful when we lose our children but also just the *threat* of losing our children can precipitate an almost constant state of sorrow” (8). This threat informs the ways Black mothers, other-mothers,<sup>35</sup> and those who mother<sup>36</sup>,

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<sup>35</sup> Patricia Hill Collins (1990) uses the term “othermother” to foreground the centrality of women-centered networks to African American families and the institution of Black motherhood. “Othermothers” assist biological mothers with mothering responsibilities.

<sup>36</sup> In this essay, I will use “othermothers” and “those who mother” interchangeably, to expand how we view motherwork in Black communities, especially by individuals who do not identify as women.

care, nurture, and view motherhood. Davis also offers “another possibility between the poles of activism motivated by anger and suicide” as a space where Black mothers live day-by-day, struggling just to get through the grief of loss. She captures this space succinctly as she states “[b]eing the mother of a slain child animates nothing but unbearable weight” (10). This weight is borne differently by everyone who experiences the loss of a child. Some of the women I encountered during my fieldwork in Chicago turned to grassroots activism to fight the erasure of their children’s lives and deaths by the state, or through the state’s intentional neglect of Black communities; others fell further into precarity as they tried simply to tackle each day as it came.

In thinking through what Black motherhood and mothering mean and look like in contemporary Black communities, I turn to the questions posed by Christina Sharpe (2016, 78): “In the afterlives of *partus sequitur ventrem*, what does, what can mothering mean for Black women, for Black people? What kind of mothering is it if one must always be prepared with knowledge of the possibility of the violent and quotidian death of one’s child?” Antiracism has forced Black mothers and those who mother to respond strategically to the knowledge that they and their children are under constant threat, are viewed as threats, and have to live with the ever-present fear of threat. This threat extends to those involved in the rearing of Black children. While some mothers turn to activism and community engagement, others withdraw and find alternative ways to deal with the grief of losing loved ones to state violence. I want our communities to reconsider our biases and shortcomings in regards to how we show up for those who mother when we disagree with/or are exasperated by their life choices—choices that may take or push them away

from community. Christen Smith (2016) writes about the after effects of state violence, a slow, silent killer—the way traumatic experiences and interactions with the state affect Black maternals emotionally, psychologically, and even physically, leading to illness and even death. She names this silent death “sequelae.” Another way we see sequelae manifest is in drug dependency and communal ostracization. How can we better support Black mothers/those who mother that are dealing with mental illness and/or drug dependency? Especially when we are aware of the connections between state violence via the war on drugs and Black motherhood?

I ask these questions as someone who has watched drug addiction steal the lives of Black women I love. My aunt Marilyn passed away on New Year’s Day, 2019. She died in a diabetic coma; her diabetes was a result of her decades-long drug dependency. She had not been seen around the neighborhood for a few days, and was found by her long-time partner in her apartment. Black motherhood always already exists outside the normative, Eurocentric frame of what ideal motherhood is supposed to be. However, her addiction prior to and after her son’s death turned her into a caricature of the maternal. She would never and could never be seen by society as a “good mother” and her presence was met with disinterest, derision, and sometimes contempt. While she still had three living sons, her frequent absences due to dependency possibly rendered her a “former mother” in the eyes of society. Christina Sharpe (2016) writes about a Black mother named Aereile Jackson who lost her children to the system in 2003 after she could not find transportation to attend family court in San Bernardino, California. In a film titled *The Forgotten Space—A Film Essay to Understand the Contemporary Maritime World in Relation to the Symbolic*

*Legacy of the Sea*, the filmmakers labeled Jackson a “former mother,” and she speaks of her experiences with poverty and the devastating effects the loss of her children, coupled with houselessness, have wreaked on her body and emotions. The filmmaker's usage of the term “former mother” further places Jackson outside the (white normative) boundaries of what constitutes a mother, mothering, and motherhood.

I ruminate on this as I think through how the violence of that same system has limited and still dictates the time I spend with my son, and how it further exacerbates the violence he is exposed to and may experience in his daily life. My attempt to leave an unhealthy relationship made me vulnerable to the state as my child's father knew how to leverage the state's repudiation of Black motherhood against me. White male judges with the power to decide what is best for my son's well-being, without the knowledge, experience, or even empathy for what it means to raise Black children in an antiblack world, have disrupted my maternal reality and forced me to rethink how I mother. What are the strategies used to cope with the ways co-parenting cross-country destabilizes the consistency and ability to teach/pass on those specific types of embodied knowledges that may keep him (if not safer) aware and informed enough to react/respond/navigate situations that are dangerous to him because he is Black? And especially when his other parent is non-Black, and thus, cannot teach him to recognize those key codes, moments, and anxieties experienced by those who inhabit Blackness? How do you transfer embodied knowledges from a distance? This is separation anxiety lived in the flesh—the inability to make him feel the sense of urgency in learning to be vigilant in his Blackness.

Knowing the probability of violent repression by the state when Black people mobilize against wanton death and everyday injustice, I have not taken my son to many protests. I have, however, regularly taken him to community meetings, grassroots organization events, cookouts, anything where queer Black folks gather to celebrate life. I regard community-building and contemporary urban marronage as just as valuable and effective as direct action and other protests that confront the state. The insistence of life from death, also known as wake work (Sharpe 2016), has been vital to Black communities' perseverance.

### **Dorothy Holmes**

Dorothy Holmes casually walked into the room wearing a Black “bebe” t-shirt, with a matching Black headwrap. She led the holding on to a young child, she led him over to where I sat in the audience, gave him her cellular phone to watch youtube videos and told him to sit quietly. He sat directly in front of me and I could see that he was no more than 4 years old. She asked him if he was hungry and after he responded “no,” she walked away and took her seat at a table with the other Black women panelists for the UC Chicago Pozen Family Center for Human Rights event, “Resistance & Democracy on the Ground: Black Women’s Struggles Against State Violence from Brazil to Chicago.” The women in attendance were members of Mães de Maio (Mothers of May), and Global Network of Mothers in Resistance, Association of friends and family members of incarcerated persons, the Global Network of Mothers in Resistance, and Monica Cosby from Moms United

Against Violence and Incarceration and Westside Justice Center. As Dorothy sat at the table getting acquainted with her fellow mothers, I noted the space, including the demographics of those in attendance. The audience in the lecture space was predominantly non-black, a mixture of ages ranging from Dorothy's young grandson to the elderly. The few, young Black femmes present sat upfront, except for myself. There was a woman translating from English to Portuguese and vice versa in the front corner of the room.

I sensed a familiarity between Dorothy and the other Black mothers from Chicago on her right; whether she knew them through her activism, from the media, or simply developed a rapport due to the shared, intimate nature of state violence and motherhood, I do not know. I sensed less familiarity between her and the women from the Maes de Maio, perhaps due to the language barrier, but a willingness to engage them was obvious in her demeanor.

As the speaker introduced the women, Dorothy's story struck me. I had heard it before during my work with the Let Us Breathe Collective. Dorothy Holmes is an activist that engages in transnational work against state violence. She relays her story in a Chicago Southside accent on the panel: *"My name is Dorothy Holmes. I got involved with community work when my son Ronald Johnson was murdered October 12th, 2014, and he was murdered by a detective whose name is George Hernandez. Once I laid my son to rest I was able to think more, and when I couldn't get the answers I wanted, why he was murdered, it made me start fighting harder to get the dashcam footage released. Which I did get released, finally, and a lot of lies came out with that dashcam footage being released. They said he turned around and pointed the gun at the officer, that's why the*



*officer shot him. But when the dashcam footage was released, it showed something totally different where he ran behind the police car, towards the park and the police drove up the street, jumped out the back seat and just started shooting. Shot at him five times, two of the bullets hit him, the main bullet hit him in the back part, and hit the artery here, and exit through his eye socket. So, I've seen the dashcam footage before, but publicly we saw it. And I was like 'awe, they lying. They said something totally different in the news.' So I started telling people they were lying. Rahm Emmanuel was covering it up! So, I tried to reach out to Rahm Emmanuel, the cowardly mayor that's not in office anymore, to have a meeting with him but he never would meet with none of the mothers with kids that have been murdered by CPD. I even chased him out of different places that he showed up at. I chased him out of there, because what are you here for?! The fight is not just here in Chicago, it's like a nationwide thing going on--it's a virus. Where, we're losing our kids here in Chicago, we're losing our kids nationwide by the hands of the law enforcement that's supposed to serve and protect but instead are taking our kids away from us. Once suddenly, like, holding all this hate and stuff against this corrupt system, I started a foundation in my son's name where I give back to the community..."*

Dorothy didn't have childcare so she was forced to bring her grandson. He was restless like most 4-year-olds--he would walk up to Dorothy as she spoke, returning to his seat only after she gently chided him. My motherly instincts took over: I began to babysit him. I took him into the hallway to play games with him, letting him run back and forth while I played the "monster." Inevitably, I tired long before he did, but was able to calm him down enough so that we could catch the tail-end of the presentation. The lack of

childcare bothered me. Even if it was last-minute, why had no one at UChicago, in the Pozen Family Center, helped to rectify this? She was a regular panelist at UChicago, after all. How do we talk about state violence while simultaneously ignoring that even with an all-too-common structural barrier such as the lack of childcare, Dorothy still showed up to speak?

In Christen Smith's 2016 essay "Facing the Dragon: Black Mothering, Sequelae, and Gendered Necropolitics in the Americas" Smith engages Patricia Hill Collins' usage of "the terms 'bloodmothers' and 'othermothers' to designate the ways in which Black women mother Black children biologically and communally (1990, 119)" (2016, 32). She then goes on to expand the traditional notion of what constitutes a mother in order to make space for what mothering has looked like in the global Black community:

*Black mothers are not just those Black women responsible for the biological reproduction of children. They are also Black women who practice social responsibility for collective care. If anti-Black necropolitics, as a transnational political process, seeks as the ultimate goal to kill in the management of life, then mothering Black children is the antithesis of this process because of its inherent function in proliferating and preserving Black life (2016: 32).*

Collective care is one of many lenses through which we can understand the expansive nature of 'mothering'. The praxis of 'collective care' provides an aperture that allows scholars to rethink/redefine/reimagine mothering so as to acknowledge and explore all the ways those who do not identify as women have been responsible for collective care and have played a pivotal role in providing a specific kind of care and nurturing that has

generally fallen to/been expected of those individuals defined through normative, heteropatriarchal terms as women. However, even within “traditional” roles of mothering, it is also apparent that certain people are expected to mother and nurture, particularly those who are darker skinned and/or overweight (Oyo and Threadcraft 2015). This relegation to “mother” or “mammyfication” is also harmful as these individuals are expected to sacrifice and care/be responsible for others.

When I re-entered the room with Dorothy's grandson, she was detailing the illnesses she had been diagnosed with since losing her son Ronald. She states candidly, “...what you want to diagnose me for? I know what I’m here for, I’m coming here to talk to someone about the issue that I’m experiencing. I didn’t get that [help] from the mental health crisis [center]; I dealt with what happened to my son on my own until I started meeting with Black Lives Matter Chicago, and other family members who experienced it. I called one mother...and I asked her, ‘how do you deal with this?’ because her fourteen-year-old son was shot in the back of the head by Chicago police...she was like ‘you’re going to have your good days, and you’re going to have your bad days.’ Once she told me that, I was able to start meeting with other mothers...so I was just meeting families, and we were able to just sit and talk about this. That made me feel strong like a lion, undefeatable.”

Here Dorothy explains how she sought help from mental health services to deal with the trauma that losing her son to the state caused. She found no respite within these settings, so she instead turned to the community. It was among Black activists and Black mothers suffering through the same ordeal that she was able to find comfort, community, and the strength to persevere. Dean Spade positions mutual aid as a powerful tool for social

justice movements and “an often devalued iteration of radical collective care” that allows us to re-envision what is politically imaginable (2020a, 131). As stated, we can see that state violence affected her deeply, as well as other Black mothers in Chicago causing not only sadness, but real issues with her health. The experiences of these women reflect what Christen Smith calls “palimpsestic embodiment.” As Smith defines it, a palimpsest is an overlay of a script that had been written many times before. Black women have been engaged in an ongoing struggle to fight against anti-black state violence and because of this, their bodies have retained and accumulated temporal and spatial knowledge such as racialized, gendered violence and as Smith contends, “the body is overlain by layers of violent reenactment” (Smith 2016). The death of Dorothy’s son has left her with a grief so tangible, it has begun to manifest itself in corporeal ways.

### **Mothering in Community**

How do those who mother navigate (the violences of the state, from the courthouse to the street) these added layers that signify the possibilities inside and outside these structures? These are the conversations the Black mothers I am in conversation with have; like my colleague Imani Wadud, I understand Black motherhood/mothering as a site of endless possibilities and transformations. Part of it is the fear that his childhood reveries will end as I acclimate him to an understanding of antiblackness—but how to do so in the limited time we have without traumatizing him with stories of slain Black children? Is it better that my choices lie between a rock and a hard place, rather than his be the spectacle

of a Black body between a knee and concrete? And what of those encounters that demonstrate how the (il)logics of antiBlackness are so embedded in our global consciousness that they prove there is no knowledge that can truly keep us safe?

I have been learning how to mother and what mothering means, in community with Black women and femmes in Chicago. I met one of the women, Elizabeth Gerald, while she and her children were sitting in the dark on a chair in the common area of “the Breathing Room.” The event was designed to honor participatory Black women, femmes, and girls through spoken word poetry, song, and visual art. As we sat in the living room, Elizabeth Gerald spoke. I looked at my son, the light from the television casting a corona around his figure. The stark contrast between his body and the darkness seemed to mirror my thoughts and feelings. Like the (other)mothers I listened to and spoke with, they were concerned with imagining and bringing into being other worlds, other futures, and other possibilities where we, along with our children, could live without fear. There is a refusal to live in a reality where violent loss is normalized. Elizabeth dealt with not only Marcie’s assault, the resulting depression and suicide attempts, but also the loss of her sister to cancer, the murder of her nephew, and then the loss of young Marcie all in 2015. Elizabeth Gerald sought community on the Southside of Chicago and has since worked tirelessly to ensure that not only is Marcie remembered by her community, but that the state that refused to protect her cannot erase her. Elizabeth founded the Marcie Jonea Gerald Movement project (MJG Movement), an organization that serves a resource for children and families that are victims of sexual abuse and suicide. To add to this, she has attempted to get a bill passed

that would create harsher sentences for those whose actions or attacks lead their victims to commit suicide.

It is through my own personal experiences, familial relationships, and work within the community that I have come to understand, like Black feminists before me, that Black mothering is deeply political; it is a site of trauma, triumph, transgression, community-building, and overall, a site of possibility. This brief essay constitutes only a small portion of the stories I learned while conducting fieldwork in Chicago. Many of the mothers and othermothers to whom I spoke or those I heard speak, refuse to allow the erasure of their children's memory, for as Dana-Ain Davis writes "[Black] children's legibility often comes in the form of death; they are known in their afterlife" (2016, 9). They sit on academic panels, speak at community events, create organizations for the protection and empowerment of Black life, they turn to spiritual healing, and sometimes, they simply focus on breathing. Just as there is no one way to mother, there is also no one strategy for survival after the loss of a child. I offer thoughts on the word "mothering" to add to existing feminist scholarship that continues the intellectual legacy that has shed light on the fact that mothering our children and nurturing our communities have been met with urgency and serve as potent examples of how our mothering has been historically constituted, constrained and agentic (McDonald 1997; Reynolds 2005; Orleck 2006)" (Davis 2016, 11-12). Just as the afterlife of slavery is constantly transforming, so are our understandings of mothering and motherhood and the strategies we use to do so, in the Black community at large.

For myself, part of learning how to mother, to heal any wounds associated with mothering or being mothered, involves being in community with other Black women and femmes and attending workshops dedicated to care. Because I consider myself a visual artist and a poet, I attended creative workshops that allow me to hone my artistic abilities and be in community with other Black women. I paint because visual art does not have the linguistic limitations that the written language has. I turn to poetry to subvert the rhetorical and structural limitations of academic writing. While attending Black Feminist Kitchen's "Black Feminist Summer School" workshop themed #WakeandWayward2020 after Christina Sharpe's *The Wake: On Blackness and Being* and Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives*: I wrote a poem that begins with a line from Gwendolyn Brook's poem "Paul Robeson."<sup>37</sup> This simple exercise allowed me to express my fears and anxieties around mothering in an antiblack world in ways that writing this article could not, and in ways that painting could not quite capture:

Cutting across the hot grit of the day  
Texas summers unforgiving  
Like living with uncertainty  
Hot like pavement  
Beneath bodies of black womxn  
Slammed, pinned to asphalt  
By pigs  
Unrelenting like southern heats  
So often are  
And have been  
For the last 400 years or so  
When Black bodies turned to Brown bodies  
In fields

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<sup>37</sup> Brooks, Gwendolyn. PAUL ROBESON. Chicago: Third World Press, 1981. Print.

Then again to Black  
On highways.  
The hot grit of the day,  
Periodically laced with  
The loud cries of cicadas  
Outside my window  
Reminding me that  
Fearing the outside world  
Does me  
No good  
As thoughts of bullets  
Decorating my bedroom walls  
Stains of red dappling  
The sheets  
While I hug my son in our slumber  
Are always a possibility  
Instead, I run to  
Childhood memories:  
Water hoses, broken fire hydrants  
Decorated with wooden planks  
Forming temporary rainbows  
Cutting across the hot grit of the day.

My anxiety is reproduced in the constant linkage of images to incidents of violence against Black women, however, neither the images nor the phrases are static. They present a progressive image that provides a teleological narrative of the carceral. It represents the way Black people who mother, nurture, care for others must assess risk and danger, but not allow it to paralyze us in fear because someone depends on us. So we must carry these anxieties with us as we go about our day, tacitly understanding that at any moment we could be harmed.

Motherhood is about reproductive rights and citizenship, which are not afforded to Black women. Our children are commodified as property of the state: the state can intervene when it sees fit and remove our children from the home or kill them in the home



or on the street. Thus our wombs become an extension of the policing of the cityscape. However, urban marronage allows us to reclaim our bodies from being an extension of the state.

The panel featuring Dorothy Holmes and the Mothers of May illuminated what so many Black women already know to be true, and what multiple Black women scholars have written about: experiences with state violence have commonalities from Brazil to Chicago. Discourses on state repression and the suppression of minorities' rights are had wherever people of the African diaspora reside. Dorothy goes on to state: "Man, if we all could just, come together as a whole and as one, we could be our own system. We can get our own communities back. Until we can come together as one, we ain't never gonna get it." She works with community organizations to change Chicago for the better through grassroots mobilization. Her parting words echoed a sentiment I had heard from many Black women:

"As far as the police, I'm gonna always have an issue with them. It's like, I want to see now what Lori Lightfoot is gonna do. I want to see what changes she makes since she's saying she's for the people. We'll see. Because I don't have no problem going after her either. Who can you call when the criminal has a badge? How do you call the police for a mental health crisis and they kill you?? ...with that being said, I'm just going to keep this fight going for justice for our kids."

Black women across the Americas have always played a vital role in the struggle for Black autonomy, visibility, and overall liberation. What is more, they also share similar

diasporic experiences of being denied visibility and centrality to this struggle, even as they are actively participating. Relegated to the margins as nothing more than maternal and/or sexual emblems of the nation or of the struggle, Black women have forged their own organizations dedicated to redressing the various violences Black women and Black people face. This is why Black motherhood is tied intimately to reproductive justice. These women's fight for justice reveals the falsehood of nationalistic claims of a post-racial democracy, harmony, and the notion that few "gains" via "inclusive" policies meant equal opportunity. They also reveal the tensions within the Black community between Black men and women when it comes to representation and centering gender justice and causes. Black women have been in a continuous battle for bodily autonomy since slavery. As *Roe v. Wade* is overturned and the rights over the bodily autonomy of birthing people are being handed back to the states, Black women and Black birthing people will experience the most harm through surveillance and criminalization. Abortion criminalization is a Reproductive justice, which is an issue that matters in the struggle against policing due to the ways surveillance from the state and deputized citizens will give strangers legal access to violate the rights of Black birthing people.

The Black womb has always been a political (and financial) battleground. Despite white supremacists regularly employing the trope of Black welfare queens breeding super predators, the contestation of *Roe v. Wade* by conservatives has brought about an interesting example of the ways the Black womb is still a valuable site of contestation. Anti-abortion proponents have consistently argued that Black people should be anti-abortion as Margaret Sanger specifically set up Planned Parenthood abortion clinics

in poor Black neighborhoods to enact a form of eugenics. Black wombs are valuable when they can be used to further white political agendas.

As Daina Ramey Berry (2017) argues, the bodies of the enslaved, from even before conception to their afterlife, were worth their pound of flesh: they possessed monetary value at every stage. As they grew, they became aware of this knowledge, however, they also possessed their own spiritual value. Over the course of 6 chapters, her book “The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation” describes the lifespan of the enslaved and their respective value through four types of slave value. The first is assessed value: the sale price of the enslaved along with taxes and fees to cover insurance, accounting, and similar costs. The second is market value: what the physical attributes of the enslaved and local market demand command financially. The third is soul value: what the enslaved themselves understood as “the spiritual value of their immortal selves,” which is what motivated their desire to continue on and was reinforced by family and loved ones (61). The fourth being ghost value: the worth of the bodies of the enslaved after death. Just as enslaved women taught their children their soul value through courageous acts of resistance (absconding, refusing to comply, etc.), Black women and birthing people also teach those they mother or care for, soul value. This was evident when I attended community events about Black history and empowerment, and mothers were there with their children so that they could learn from a young age what it means to take pride in and fight for their community. It was also evident in the way Marcie Gerald's Mother, Elizabeth, honored her daughter's memory and continues to pursue justice. Contemporarily, Black bodies still hold monetary value;

especially as media sensationalism.

Jenn Jackson's (2019) article, "Black Americans and the 'crime narrative': comments on the use of news frames and their impacts on public opinion formation, Politics, Groups, and Identities" provides nuanced insight into the ways biased media framing negatively portrays Black Americans as these choices "have a critical impact on the ways that stories about racial minorities shape public opinion on issues of immigration, race, and healthcare in the U.S., among other issues" (232). Black bodies are newsworthy when used to garner views or arouse the public's passion. This type of news slant is very apparent in Chicago's reporting of gun violence.

### **Conclusion**

Within the logics of the carceral state, Black maternals are presumed criminal and deviant. The connections between reproductive justice and abolition make visible the ways that the carceral state relies upon these stereotypes to manage Black populations in the service of death when Black maternal mortality rates are on the rise. For non-Hispanic Black women, the mortality rate was 55.3 deaths per 100,000 live births, 2.9 times the rate for non-Hispanic White women. What is more, the rates for non-Hispanic Black women were significantly higher than rates for non-Hispanic White and Hispanic women. The increases from 2019 to 2020 for non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic women were significant, in comparison to non-Hispanic White women, which was not significant.<sup>38</sup> Already

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<sup>38</sup> Donna L. Hoyert, Ph.D., Division of Vital Statistics authored a report on maternal death rates in the United States titled "Maternal Mortality Rates in the United States, 2020" found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/maternal-mortality/2020/maternal-mortality-rates-2020.htm>

burdened with the lack of affordable, accessible, and racially equitable medical care, further restrictions on bodily autonomy will only exacerbate these numbers. It is imperative that organizations that fight state violence and police violence recognize these connections and work together with organizations that focus on reproductive justice.

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## **Chapter Four: Liminal Freedoms: Black Queer Feminist Spatial Praxis**

In chapter one, I gave an overview of Chicago's history with policing, from the Great Migration until now. I have discussed how the foundation of Chicago's carceral regime began to rise prior to the wars on drugs and crime; I do not downplay or deny the impact of these wars on the Black and Brown community in Chicago, in fact, their impact on Black and Brown communities is visible to this day through policies that lead to organized abandonment, gentrification, and hyperpolicing. Chapter two focuses on sex work and sex worker activism as a lens through which to understand how racialized, gendered stereotypes and the politics of respectability foster a carceral system and environment that cause harm to Black women and queer and trans folks.

In this chapter, I give an ethnographic account of my experiences on the South and West sides of Chicago with organizations, collectives, and events that were led by Black, queer, women and femmes. I also draw attention to the fact that many of these included Black/Afro Latina leadership as well as membership. While the diasporic nature of Black struggle is not novel, scholarship that focuses on the gendered aspect of this struggle in Chicago most certainly is. What is more, the groups I highlight in this chapter center a Black, queer feminist praxis in their fight against the deterioration of their communities in the face of daily state violence and disregard. The multicultural and multidimensional nature of this struggle has only emphasized the importance of incorporating a diasporic analysis of Black spatial practices in Chicago—practices in the service of life, a refusal of social death and the necropolitical logics of the state.

The focus of this chapter is Black women's diasporic spatial practices such as contemporary urban marronage and what Zenzele Isoke (2011) terms "homemaking", and their relationship to the goal of abolition. I argue that while working towards abolition, many of these groups engage in what I argue is "contemporary urban marronage" and also work to transform their relationship to the city through the process of "homemaking." By focusing on contemporary urban marronage as a site of Black study, I invoke Katherine McKittrick's call to develop an analytic that "does something new to the black body—dislodging it as the only source of black knowledge (and therefore liberation), while also honoring it as the location through which black anti-colonial praxis emerges" (2017: 99). Savannah Shange (2019) states the difference between revolution and abolition is that "[r]evolution seeks to win control of the state and its resources, while abolition wants to quit playing and raze the stadium of settler-slaver society for good" (3). To this she adds that abolition is "a messy breakup with the state—rending, not reparation" (4). The women and femmes I spoke with and worked with differed in their opinions of the state: some were absolutely opposed to the idea that the state could be recuperated, while others had hope, but were not wed to the belief that radical change is possible through reformation.

### **What Do You Need To Breathe Freely?**

When thinking through<sup>39</sup> the experiences and conversations I had in Chicago, I began to contemplate how the arts, healing practices, and the metaphysical serve as a praxis of communal liberation to some of the folks in these spaces. What does it mean to turn to non-European, non-western healing practices and beliefs outside of that which has been imposed on us? To operate outside Eurocentric logics and study these sites as sites of radical potentiality that disrupt the status quo? It was Audre Lorde who argued that poetry is vital to our existence in her 1977 essay “poetry is not a luxury.” Poetry, according to Lorde, “forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into ideas, then into more tangible action.” It is, Lorde asserts, “the skeletal architecture of our lives.” I have witnessed the transformational power of poetry—its ability to bring the audience to tears or jubilation. I have felt the palpable energy within a crowd reflected in the pulsing heartbeats of the audience as they wait with baited breath to hear the poet deliver another line. “Go ‘head poet!” followed by the sharp sounds of finger snaps to encourage the wordsmith on, shouting “talk yo shit!” In a room barely big enough to fit 20 chairs, there was a poet on stage, her bronze skin set ablaze by the multicolored lights surrounding her. Next to her, a woman painted while she spoke. It was mesmerizing; the energy, the love, the joy in this small room filled me as though a light were touching every dark corner, every inch of me that had been shrouded by that constant companion—anxiety. Here, I could put that weight down and get lost in words that spoke to the experiences and emotions I have felt in the

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<sup>39</sup> I developed my conceptualization of healing with my colleagues Imani Wadud, Alysia Mann Carey, and Chloe Faux



very depths of my soul. This space was a home place. When you enter the breathing room, you are greeted by a board with the following “Brave Space Agreements”:

1. I agree to love myself and others
2. I agree to be accountable for what I do and say
3. I agree to struggle against racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, misogyny, shame and other harmful systems.
4. I agree to handle conflict with love, respect, and without calling police.
5. I agree that my gifts bring value to this space and I receive the gifts the space offers me.

The Let Us Breathe Collective is a part of a long genealogy of Black women organizing against the state. It is a collective that “aims to harness creative capital and cultural production to deconstruct systemic injustice in America and worldwide.” Let Us Breathe (LUB) is a “grassroots alliance of artists, journalists, and activists” that use their “talents to amplify marginalized voices, disrupt the status quo, offer opportunities for healing and education, and provoke critical thought and dialogue about the intersections of oppression through film, music, theater, poetry, and civil disobedience.” The collective was founded by a brother-sister Hip Hop duo from Logan Square, and Marquette Park, Chicago.

The older sister, Kristiana Colon, is an African-American and Puerto Rican artist. Colon was inspired by the fight that still existed in the city’s downtrodden residents and wanted to create change in Chicago. With the help of her brother Damon, she brought

together local artists and community members to create an organization that would attempt to address the various needs of the Back of the Yards, Southside community in which they are based. Some of LUB's activism focused on community political education (i.e. "Know Your Rights" workshops, and even voter education. One of their main strategies against state violence was through direct action. Because activism is a process that undergoes constant refinement and analysis shifts, this vision later changed from direct action (protests that shut down freeways) to addressing hunger, houselessness and creating a space for healing (mental and spiritual). Let Us Breathe as a collective was inspired by Ferguson but it also came about as Kristiana and Damon canvassed the Southside neighborhood of Lawndale asking residents what they felt they needed to breathe freely. North Lawndale is one of the most incarcerated zip codes of Illinois, one of the most hyper-policed, hyper-surveilled and most socially divested—when former Mayor Rahm Emmanuel closed fifty schools in Chicago, nine of those fifty were in Lawndale.

Black communities in Chicago employ a variety of strategies to produce positive results for their communities; one manner is working within different institutions, while another is divesting from the state altogether. One example of an institutional approach is when on June 19th, 2019, the Black Lives Matter Chicago chapter cooperated with the Chicago Torture Justice Center and other organizations for a community testimonial in Hyde Park as an opportunity for southside residents to learn about "Consent Decree" and speak on their experiences with police violence. The Consent Decree is a court ordered mandate meant to govern broad police reform from use of force and officer training to officer accountability. During this event, several mothers and partners who have been

impacted (whether through death or the incarceration of a loved one) denounced the hyperpolicing of Black and Brown areas.

As I watched these women—mothers, sisters, and aunts—speak of how the immediate grief and anger of losing a loved one isn’t the only trauma they experience, I could feel the emotion in the room. The room was thick with empathy and anger, along with nods of encouragement and agreement as one woman named LaRae, a member of Justice For Families, went on the state that the entire process of losing a loved one to police violence is traumatic “because you have so many other layers that you have to deal with: from the medical examiner, to the police, to the attorney, to the politicians, to the public scrutiny because it’s always your loved one’s fault no matter what happens. That’s what society does--that’s the first thing they ask you, ‘well what did he do?’ They never say ‘what did the police do?’” At the same time that I sat in this building with my young son in the next room playing games on a tablet, my phone began to vibrate with notifications from Facebook and text messages. As soon as I opened the application, I immediately saw a video of police surrounding my younger brother in Milwaukee. He was on the pavement face down, guns drawn and pointed directly at him. The person recording the video was shouting at police not to harm my brother, the panic evident in their shrill voice. As I continued to watch, I could feel my face begin to burn as my blood pressure elevated. My heart raced and I felt dizzy. I feared I would watch my brother executed on video—it did not escape me at that moment that I could be the next on stage to give testimony about the irreparable damage done to my family. I took a moment out in the hall to collect myself,

call my siblings, to find out if my brother was ok, and to hold my very confused child. Later that night, I would explain to him in a way I thought an eight-year-old could process.

Black women are spearheading these organizations and movements as a direct response to what they see as the state's inability to address the violence it creates and exacerbates in Black communities. These women understand that because of their race, gender identity, ability, and class, they face a unique violence rooted in misogynoir (Bailey 2013) that the state either cannot or will not address. After interviewing women on the South and West sides of Chicago, working with various grassroots organizations, sitting in courthouses, meetings, and events, what became apparent was Black women's frustrations with their constant erasure from narratives of state violence against Black communities. The erasure of Black women, along with the tendency to collapse Black men and women so that "men" stands for the whole of the community, ignores the unique types of violence black women face. Black women voiced that any institution that was not created for or by Black women to address the ongoing violence and trauma in the black community has not served them holistically.

According to Kristiana Colon, Black people in the community "had a cogent, nuanced analysis of what was happening, of their circumstances, of the interlocking systems that created the violence that killed Mike Brown, but they were very clear that it was not just Mike Brown." Kristiana and others refer to themselves as abolitionists: they are trying to demolish the prison nation. They don't want to see justice by the system they know is broken; they want to dismantle the whole system, encouraging their community to imagine what it would mean to divest from the state, live stateless lives thriving through

community self-sufficiency. Their primary focus is not direct action (i.e. physical confrontation with the state via protests) but developing a praxis that centers on the well-being of the community, liberation, and envisioning a stateless future.

The grassroots activism of Black women, girls, femmes, and nonmen of varying classes, sexualities, identities, and abilities demonstrate an inter-generational genealogy of U.S. Black Feminist theories and praxes that do not represent a monolithic, static ideology, but rather dynamically complex and ever-changing evolution of thought and ways of viewing Black futurity. By examining Black women's organizing and spatial practices through the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class and also geography, as they affect Black women in Chicago, this chapter reconceptualizes the politics of resistance. This chapter (and dissertation overall) critically examines what impact Black women's position as a marginalized group has had on their ability to benefit from citizenship and equal protection under the law and how this has affected their political behavior. Combined with this, this chapter analyzes Black women's individual and collective activism, involvement in Black freedom organizations and Black social movements to understand not only their roles within these movements and organizations, but also how their gender, class, and sexuality inform how they disrupt, challenge, and navigate the carceral conditions and landscape of Chicago.

In this chapter, I highlight the Afro-diasporic nature of Black women's struggles for liberation, recognition, empowerment, and the organic nature of Black feminism *as* resistance, while it also illustrates Black women's resolve, resilience, and ability to adapt praxis and pedagogy when forming movements and organizations. By examining the

critical role of Black women in building, sustaining, and leading movements across spatial and temporal boundaries, it is possible to see the power of representation and self-definition. These movements and organizations not only give Black women a voice and carve out a space, but essentially are created for the liberation of all Black people, and more so, all oppressed people. I aim to highlight the often-ignored history of Black women's contributions to various Black movements and their importance to our emancipation and the rights we currently (and precariously) hold. The individuals and organizations listed here serve as an example of a small number of folks engaging in the classic tradition of radical Black feminism that centers gender in race and class analysis.

Central to Black feminism in the United States is its emphasis of and foundation in the articulation of intersectionality as well as the simultaneity of oppressions (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991). This intellectual framework challenges the way that other disciplines such as Sociology, Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, etc. treat the simultaneity and multiplicity of inequality and oppression as isolated issues. The stories and analysis in this chapter are essential in helping to shape as well as expand existing conceptions of resistance, driving an examination of how and why resistance is gendered for Black women.

### **The problem with Latinidad**

While living on the outskirts of the South Side's Hyde Park Neighborhood in 2019, it occurred to me that most of the events I attended were focused on issues that predominantly

centered Black communities with no allusion to Latinidad. I began to search for events by Latine groups to rectify this. As Chicago has urbanized throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has done so while developing a racially segregated topography. The South Side is considered the "Black" side of Chicago, with the historically Mexican neighborhoods of Pilsen and "Back of the Yards" being exceptions. The West Side, and particularly the area surrounding Humboldt Park, was populated by Puerto Ricans and African Americans. The North Side and Westside are both predominantly white, with Rogers Park being a mostly mixed neighborhood. This racial segregation is at times reflected in the demographic makeup of the various organizations based in these communities. For example, in April 2019, I attended the event by the organization Mujeres Latinas En Accion called "Latinas & the Me Too Movement, 1 Year Later." This event took place in Pilsen in a community center. I arrived to the event which was held in a medium-sized room. There were three Latinas (none were visibly Black) who sat facing the group of attendees, and behind the attendees was a table with food and drinks. Out of the fourteen people that attended (mostly women, only two men), most were Mestizo, a few were white or white Latines, and I was the only Black person in the room.

The panelists who spoke cited that Latinas did not see themselves and experiences reflected in the #MeToo Movement. They also noted that Latinas do not have access to resources around issues of sexual harassment and assault, as well as the dangers they face in trying to access the resources they do find (dangers such as retaliation from abusers, issues with unsupportive family members, and issues around immigration status). However, what I realized while listening to these concerns was that the panelists never

once mentioned the name of the *actual* founder of the #MeToo Movement--Tarana Burke. When the time came for questions from the audience, I raised my hand. I stood up and introduced myself as an Afro-Puerto Rican graduate student who studies violence against Black women. I extended my gratitude for their space and time and said that I would like to point out that Tarana Burke founded an organization with the term "Me Too" in 2006 in the Bronx, specifically for Black and Brown girls and women who have experienced sexual violence. I told them that the narratives we give space to often erase others that we should be uplifting--for example, white women in Hollywood hijacked the spirit of the #MeToo movement, ignoring who it was actually intended for. And whether or not the women who came together to create and speak at the panel meant to, they were also erasing Burke and the girls and women she fights for. My comments left the room in an awkward silence that I had become used to over the years. Other attendees spoke, but no one really addressed my comments, and I sat in my chair nonplussed. Later, the Latina who moderated the event came up to me and thanked me for my comments, and we had a brief conversation about Burke, as she was already familiar with her and agreed with what I had said earlier.

This experience, while it may have seemed uneventful to others, solidified for me my discomfort in spaces with nonblack Latines. It was also a deciding factor in how I would spend the rest of my time researching in Chicago--I would only attend events by Latines that either close friends have vouched for, or that I knew would be racially diverse. It also helped me to understand why it is that many of the Afro-Latinas and Black Latinas I met identified more with Blackness than Latinidad and as such, Latinidad often disappears in Black spaces.



**Reiki, Tarot, and Bombazos: Community Healing and Histories of Resistance  
on the Puerto Rican West side of Chicago**

*“We are the hyphenated people of the Diaspora whose self-defined identities are no longer shameful secrets in the countries of our origin, but rather declarations of strength and solidarity. We are an increasingly united front from which the world has not yet heard.”*

-Audre Lorde, A Burst of Light  
May 23, 1984  
Berlin, West Germany

*I lie on a white massage table with my eyes closed, hands folded over my stomach, and my mind darting restlessly from one thought to another. I wondered what to expect. How would I know if this was actually working? What even is reiki? How is it that this Puerto Rican organization, AfriCaribe, came to view reiki as a resource that would benefit this westside community? I tried to quiet my mind, expel the researcher in me for a moment. I did not come here as a scholar. I came to feel connected to the community I used to belong to as a kid and teenager. I wanted to see what community remained amidst the rapid gentrification of the historically Puerto Rican neighborhood called Humboldt Park. As the reiki healer moved her hands palm down, hovering inches over my head down to my feet, I felt this strange sense of electricity and vibration building. Clearly I’m tripping, I thought. Maybe I just wanted to feel something--nope, there it was again, that same, electric*

*vibration, low and subtle, but definitely there. I blinked back the tears I felt threatening to fall as she worked over me. When she finished, she told me to open my eyes, gave me a cup of water to drink, and told me I needed to drink lots of water that day and the next. Energy healing leaves you very depleted and thirsty, apparently.*

***May 2019. Chicago Field Notes.***

I felt different, but I couldn't quite say how. Just different. I stepped outside the small room that looked like it was once a storefront, really, onto "El Paseo Boricua"--what once was the commercial heart of Puerto Rican Chicago. I looked out into the late spring sunshine, in deep thought, processing my emotions when Daisy, the reiki healer came jogging out. "Oh! Good. I thought you left before I could give you feedback!" she said. I listened intently to what the Afro-Boricua healer had discovered about me as she read the energy in my body. I didn't expect any feedback, so that was a pleasant surprise. I won't share what she told me, much of it was personal. But I will share that she told me quite a few of my chakras weren't activated or were blocked, specifically the crown, the third eye, the throat, and the root. There are only 7 chakras, so that's over half of them. As you can imagine, my shit was fucked up and the stress of academia is one of the main causes. She also sensed that my mind was running a mile a minute during the session. She gave me recommendations on meditations, affirmations to say aloud, herbs to drink, and stones to keep with me. We also spoke briefly regarding the types of stresses that Black women experience and the illnesses those can lead to. It was really comforting to have this conversation with a fellow Afro-Puerto Rican woman, and not feel weird or uncomfortable

doing so. I came back several more times, and the next time I visited, I brought my then 9-year-old son to Daisy.

### **Present-Day Marronage as immediate survival and community forging**

In order to flesh out present-day marronage in Humboldt Park, I return to the conversation I had with Daisy the reiki healer: she recognized how the convergence of day-to-day stresses such as living in poverty, dealing with racism, intimate partner violence, police violence, and so on, can manifest as illness in the body. Reiki was provided by the Puerto Rican Cultural Organization AfriCaribe once a month for free due to the fact that there are many stipulations for receiving alternative medicine when thinking about insurance and what medicare or private insurance companies will cover, if you have insurance at all. She turned to these alternative forms of healing to address the traumas that manifest corporeally, mentally, and spiritually, realizing that the state could not be trusted to treat the symptoms of its own making, when it refused to even acknowledge the myriad ways it is literally killing these communities through physical violence and intentional neglect.

Here I engage with Christen Smith's (2016) vast body of work on the gendered, antiblack, necropolitical logics of the state. These logics function so that Black people die not only from direct, state violence, but so that Black women and those who mother, die from the lingering, slow death of sequelae due to trauma, grief, and stress eroding their mental and physical health. Smith defines sequelae as "the gendered, reverberating, deadly effects of state terror that infect the affective communities of the dead" (Smith 2016: 31).

The state causes the conditions that bring about sequelae; sequelae then manifest in the bodies of Black women in Chicago. If the state cannot or will not register or locate the injury it causes to Black women's bodies, then alternative forms of recognition and knowledge are necessary. These technologies function in a similar vein to what Lorgia Garcia Pena (2016) calls "religiosity," --spirituality or spiritual practice that can "offer the opportunity for making the invisible visible and for embodying resistance at moments of censorship and control..." (p. 82). Reiki offers a different sensory capacity through which the violence of the state becomes visible or legible.

These alternative modes of healing demonstrate Black women's refusal to surrender to death and devastation. These practices are moments of triage in the face of a larger war being waged against Black communities. Black women understand that the multimodal forms of violence, traumas, and stressors that they experience on a day-to-day level necessitate unconventional and nontraditional Western and white methods of healing and therapy that cannot be found in traditional medical spaces. Marronage as an analytic allows me to think through what I see as Black communities recognizing the need for alternative everything: working with and mostly outside the confines of the state to address the needs of the community.

I often speculate on what this experience and conversation would have been like with a white healer who undoubtedly would not have had the same insights into the everyday violence Black women face. It matters who wields these technologies of recognition and healing. Bomba, tarot, and especially reiki represent embodied resistance and technologies that contest domination and oppression, and how "knowledge comes to

be embodied through flesh, an embodiment of spirit” (Garcia Pena 2016: 82). These practices enable the readers and dancers to pick up on the violences that have been enacted upon the body and the spirit by the state, the same state that tries to elide the harm it continuously causes to the most vulnerable in our communities. This anecdote is not an argument for the merits or validity of reiki, but an attempt to elucidate how Black women’s spatial practices constitute a form of marronage from the violence of the state. I argue that Black women in Chicago engage in marronage and what Zenzele Isoke (2011; 2013) terms “homemaking.” According to Isoke, homemaking requires “re-spatializing social capital...reconstructing and reconfiguring relationships of trust, positive reciprocity, cooperation, and care within and between black people and [the] political imaginary” (2013, 118). This oppositional spatial praxis occurs within the context of rapid gentrification amidst urban redevelopment as Black women negotiate and navigate what Henri LeFebvre (1974) famously termed the “right to the city.”

Marronage has come to possess various definitions. Perhaps the most well-known is Neil Robert’s definition of marronage as maroons “cultivating freedom on their own terms within a demarcated social space that allows for the enactment of subversive speech acts, gestures, and social practices antithetical to the ideals of” oppressive agents (Roberts 2015, 5). In short, Roberts addresses other scholars’ conceptualization of enslaved people as lacking agency. He argues that the liminal space between freedom and slavery offers the enslaved the agency to contest their subjectivity. If the carcerality of Chicago is a product of the afterlife of slavery (Hartman 2016), then the spaces created and occupied by Black women organizers in Chicago constitute marronage as they serve to celebrate Black life

and community while refusing social death. It is through the healing practices that are illegible to the state within these spaces that they also resist literal death. Whether or not these spaces of marronage were created intentionally or are even being recognized as such by those who inhabit them, these spaces and gatherings are acts of resistance against the necropolitical logics of the state.

Roberts states that an important aspect to absconding is that "during marronage, agents struggle psychologically, socially, metaphysically, and politically to exit slavery, maintain freedom, and assert a lived social space while existing within a liminal position" (5). Marronage allows organizations and groups of individuals to organize and challenge the systems that continue to reproduce themselves rather than challenge paradigms. The creation of spaces by Afro-Latinas in Chicago follows a history of organizing for the betterment of the community, however, with a gendered analysis that draws from and responds to the ongoing legacies of criminalizing Black and Brown women and femmes who dare to imagine possibilities outside those left to them by the repressive apparatus of the state.

Yannick Marshall's (2020) definition of marronage as a strategy to live life on one's own terms as it is understood that the state cannot be undone through its own mechanisms. But rather:

Marronage, as a politics, does not hold the state's feet to the fire — at least not in the hopes that it will be improved. It does not think or hope the state will one day get better. Indeed, Black marronage, is by definition the escape from the central

spaces of the white supremacist order, a voting with the feet, is an expression of a fundamental pessimism about the colony's capacity to improve and to do so in a timely fashion. Maroon politics recognizes the fugitive's inability to overturn the state of things and so flees to spaces where it is possible to live outside of the reach of racist power. Or, flees and retreats to a better position.<sup>40</sup> In fleeing there is also recognition of settler-colonialism's incapacity to rid itself of its founding ideology: racist violence.

Marshall's call to "bring the maroon to the foreground in Black intellectual history is timely. An in-depth look into the many facets of marronage would tell us how Black spatial practices in the past and especially today inform a Black politics of liberation and survival. Adam Bledsoe (2017) explains how "the central quality of these settlements—regardless of the number of members or how long the community lasted—was protection against the violence that typified slave society and the valuation of Black life amidst a world that saw Afro-descendant populations as completely devoid of humanity" (32). The recognition of the permanence of violence under settler-colonialism animates Black women's construction of spaces that can and do serve as places of (temporary) respite from the violence enacted by the state. While recognizing that the state cannot be recuperated, these

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<sup>40</sup> Marshall adds the following footnote: "It may, in some cases, be useful to think of marronage as the war of position and enslaved peoples' uprisings as the war of manoeuvre. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Edited and Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971)."

spaces allow for the recuperation of the body, mind, spirit, and a stronger sense of Black community.

As enslaved people in various nations across the Americas struggled against captivity, and their descendants have taken up that struggle today, generative theorizations of marronage must extend beyond the United States to include Latin America and the Caribbean. As people migrate across the Global South and North, so too do their cultural memory, as well as their political beliefs and attitudes. Bomba, a call-and-response dance and drumming form of cultural resistance and ancestral knowledge passed down through the generations in Puerto Rico and the United States is one example of this. The Batey, the space or the circle within which dancers and drummers interact through performance, serves as a site of home-making and marronage. I elaborate on this further in the chapter.

The conceptualization of marronage this dissertation engages with draws heavily from Afro Brazilian intellectual Beatriz Nascimento's theorization of quilombo as "not only as a fixed geographic space where enslaved Africans escaped bondage in the past, but also as an extant political practice alive in the everyday cultures and survival strategies of contemporary Black Brazilians" (Smith and Gomes 2021, 281).

I take up her analysis in the context of Chicago and would further argue that practices of marronage occur throughout the diaspora. Other framings of fugitivity and resistance outside the US context allows us to think through the concept of marronage in urban spaces and non-linear temporal understandings of freedom. These spaces are ephemeral because they have been, and there is no indication that they will be otherwise;



Nascimento's concept of quilombo allows us to lean into and theorize about the ephemerality of these spaces, understandings of freedom, and practices of fugitivity while simultaneously engaged in abolition—which means fighting for a future. The translation of the collective works of Black Brazilian thinker and activist Beatriz Nascimento (1942-1995) for the first time into English in collaboration with her only daughter, Bethania Gomes is what I cite in this dissertation. Nascimento was a historian, poet, theorist, and organizer who played a key role in Brazil's Black Movement until her untimely death in 1995. She wrote at the height of Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985) and theorized "extensively on the Black condition in Brazil; the unique experience of Black women; and quilombos...as spaces of both historical and contemporary fugitivity" (281). Nascimento's conceptualization of Black autonomous spaces post-slavery as extensions of practices of fugitivity provides a way to bring marronage into the present century, further demonstrating that Black women intellectuals across the diaspora are and have been theorizing within the context of the afterlife of slavery.

### **Westside Histories of State Terror and Resistance**

Sensationalized news reports of inner-city violence create an image of Chicago as a city plagued by gun-toting, gang-affiliated Black youth from broken homes and a culture of poverty. "Law and order" and punitive measures of social control are not just a political response to criminality, but also a way to manage communities, surveil Black organizers, and quash any nascent rebellion. Narratives of "Black-on-Black crime" and "lawless

rioting and looting” serve to delegitimize these communities’ attempts to confront the state and address the myriad abuses that Black and Brown communities continue to suffer. By criminalizing the actions of marginalized people who organize against poverty, educational disparities, police abuses, and other issues plaguing their communities, the state obscures its role as the cause of the social unrest through the terror it regularly visits upon the most marginalized residents of Chicago. This is part of an existing history and pattern of political radicalism followed by state repression. Historic examples of this cycle of struggle and repression include the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party, The Almighty Black P Stone Rangers, The Young Lords, and Fred Hampton’s attempt at forging the Rainbow Coalition.

“Law and order” and punitive measures of social control are not just a political response to criminality, but also a way to manage communities, surveil Black and Brown organizers, and quash any nascent rebellion. To trace this political lineage, I turn to Ana Ramos-Zayas’ article “Delinquent Citizenship, National Performances: Racialization, Surveillance, and the Politics of ‘Worthiness’ in Puerto Rican Chicago” in which she analyzes how Puerto Ricans who migrated to Chicago’s West Side Neighborhood, Humboldt Park, in the 1950s and 1960s were criminalized, rendered “terrorist,” and how Puerto Rican US citizenship gets produced as “delinquent,” approaching a status of “illegality” that has traditionally been imposed on other Latine immigrants. Ramos-Zayas juxtaposes this delinquent status with what she terms is the deployment of a “politics of

worthiness.” This involved Puerto Ricans proving their value to the United States by serving in record numbers in the military.

The association of Puerto Ricans with criminality and violence began as early as the 1960’s as they were pathologized as “noisy,” “nervous,” and as living on the streets and sidewalks in the warm weather months (Ramos-Zayas 2004). They were also socially maligned for the assumption that Puerto Ricans had no civic institutions or social organizations. This portrayal depicted Puerto Ricans as lazy, irresponsible, violent, and vice-prone. In 1966 Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Chicago amid racial unrest to meet with the Chicago Freedom Movement and was met with organized white violence, which led to later clashes between African Americans and police in Black neighborhoods. While police and white citizens terrorized Black residents, they were doing the same to the Puerto Rican residents of Humboldt Park. Puerto Ricans responded to regular police violence such as beatings and shootings with riots. In fact, in June of 1966, immediately after the inaugural Puerto Rican Day Parade, police brutality incited what has been called the first Puerto Rican riot in US history (Padilla, 1985: 46-50; 1987: 123-125, 144-155; Ramos-Zayas, 2004: 28-29). These “riots” reflected “the more general climate of radical politics and racial militancy in Chicago during the 1960s” (Ramos-Zayas 2004, 29). It was during the summer of 1966 that the city became the scene of civil rights marches against racial segregation in housing (Ramos-Zayas 2004).

These moments of collective action and social unrest allowed not only for the “creation of specifically Puerto Rican-identified organizations but also for the

consolidation of a geographically based notion of Puerto Rican community” (Ramos-Zayas 2004, 29). We see then, how Humboldt Park as a particular urban space is marked as Puerto Rican, associated with civil unrest and conflict, pathologized as criminal and later on terrorist, and rendered vulnerable to surveillance and state violence and how that then leads to the creation of radical, political organizations like the Puerto Rican Young Lords in the 1960’s who were inspired by the Black Panthers, and the Fuerzas Armadas para la Liberación Nacional (FALN) in the 1980’s who advocated for political independence for PR. Both of these organizations were founded and remained primarily based in Chicago.

Often, there is a masculinist discourse around state violence and social movements, however, Chicago offers multiple examples of Black women across diasporic registers organizing against the violences they experience at the hands of the state. An example of which is Afro-Puerto Rican women on the West side organizing bombazos for the community. During those restless summers of my fieldwork in Chicago, I also began to notice what seemed to be an uptick in bomba workshops. Sarah Bruno’s beautiful discussion of the ways bomba attends to the effects of *destierro* (dispossession), antiblackness, colonialism, and transnational identities in Chicago informs my analysis of the bomba performances I witnessed. Bruno’s article in Taller Electric Marronage, titled “Bomba for Breonna Taylor: #NiUnaMas, #SayHerName, and Endurance,” recounts a particular experience she had in the wake of the Breonna Taylor verdict. She describes a community stricken with anger and grief, that turns to one another and Bomba to both mourn and affirm the life of Breonna Taylor. Bruno describes the workshop for Breonna

Taylor, how her teacher played a *yubá*— “a rhythm of depth--pain, veneration, rage, courage and war.” For Bruno, this particular bomba workshop affirmed her long-held understanding that bomba shows us how the “embodied historical tradition of feeling and navigating colonial subjecthood lies in the traditions that act as a salve to a *destierro*<sup>41</sup>, or a pain that aches beyond the geopolitical boundaries.” She further elucidates that bomba is “a balm that attends to the cost of an enduring and insufferable history of *coloniality*. The traditions that survived the plantation and exist in its *wake* are simultaneously the *haunting* and the blessing.” Black communities, and Black Latinas specifically, are contesting colonial occupation and oppression through the arts, healing, and spirituality while engaging in marronage.

While Black women are curating private spaces for their community, they are also transforming their relationship to the city of Chicago through the reclamation of spaces in their own neighborhoods. One of the organizations doing so is A Long Walk Home (ALWH)--a national art organization committed to gender equity and racial justice by empowering youth to end violence against girls and women. The nonprofit was founded in 2003 by sisters Salamishah and Sheherazade Tillet with the goal of working with artists, students, activists, therapists and other community organizations to cultivate leaders that elevate marginalized voices while they “facilitate healing and activate social change.” An example of this social change is the “Douglass Park Takeover.” As Black women, girls, and femmes’ right to the city is increasingly eroded due to the dangers of urban (in this I

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<sup>41</sup> <https://nupress.northwestern.edu/content/decolonizing-diasporas>

include police) violence, more organizations have responded through the reclamation of these spaces of harm.

The transfiguration of spaces where Black women and girls previously experienced gender-based violence into safe spaces for them to gather and build community articulates a politics of resistance. This resistance allows Black women to “transform their communities by reimagining and reconfiguring people’s relationships to the physical, symbolic, and relational spaces of the communities that they live in” (Isoke 2011, 119; Haney 2001; Davies 1994). This transformation is homemaking. Following Seigworth and Gregg (2011), Zenzele Isoke (2011) argues that “affect is the *force that drives us toward movement, toward thought and extension*” (italics original, 119). Thus, this homemaking is an “affective form of resistance” that involves “more than just being attentive to and providing care to individuals. It also requires building an enduring affective relationship to the physical environment” (119). Homemaking involves establishing a “homeplace” from which to resist white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal domination (Isoke 2011). The term homeplace as used by Isoke was coined by bell hooks (1990, 42). Homeplaces do not have physical boundaries, so they are not confined by walls. That is to say, an outside space, such as a public park can serve as a homeplace just as a storefront room can serve as a homeplace. I would also argue that homemaking is an important aspect of contemporary urban marronage in Chicago.

Black spatial practices render the relationship between the Black body and its environment visible in many ways. Following Lefebvre’s conceptualization of space, space is produced and consumed by collective social practice and so is a part of everyday

experience. Because space involves social relationships, Lefebvre contends it is an arena of social struggle. As Rinaldo (2002) writes, “[s]pace may be dominated by technology and power or appropriated to serve the needs of a resistant group. Recognizing the quotidian dimensions of space allows us to understand that not only does power produce space, but also everyday acts of resistance contest the dominant mapping of space” (165). The contestation of the “dominant mapping of space,” or, oppositional spatial practices (Isoke 2014), is another Black, feminist, queer spatial practice occurring in Chicago.

In 2018, Black Girl Takeover inaugurated a public art program by Black girls and young women in North Lawndale’s Douglas Park, an area notorious for occurrences of physical and sexual assault against Black women and girls. In order to address the rising crisis of violence against Black girls in Chicago, A Long Walk Home’s Girl/Friends artists and activists partnered with the Chicago Park District to transform the park and the community’s relationship to it by saturating the park with various expressions of Black girlhood. This included double-dutch, a live concert by Chicago’s Jamila Woods, an outdoor photography exhibition and photoshoot, and the “Healing Tree” where the collective and attendees gathered to pay tribute to recently missing and murdered Black girls. Douglass Park is also where 22 year-old Rekia Boyd was murdered by off-duty police officer Dante Servin on March 21, 2012. In homage to Rekia, A Long Walk Home created #SayHerName: The Rekia Boyd Memorial Project. This project is part of their goal to create a “permanent monument dedicated to the life of Rekia Boyd and activate and infuse public spaces with their vision and voice and serve as a national model that recognizes black girls as innovative leaders and powerful organizers.” This act of spatial opposition is

an act of homemaking—reconfiguring not only the space itself, but the history and future of the space to support Black life and creative expression.



## **Toward a Non-Conclusive End**

*I am convinced that the youth are speaking with the knowledge of the ancestors, and we would do well to listen. In our arrogance, we have confused old age with wisdom and cannot see the in letting the young ones go forward with all that they have learned from the community that surrounds them.*

*I wanted to honor the Black women, girls, and femmes, struggling to make their neighborhoods better, struggling to hold onto what love and light they find, struggling to make it through the day. Because in doing so, I honor the memory of the Black women who came before me, fighting so that I may stand tall, wherever I am.*

*Hope is a powerful drug.*

*And just like hope, anger can also be a powerful motivator, but unlike hope, anger is not sustainable.*

### **Prose--June 2022**

At the time I write this, there have been countless more Black men, women, and children murdered by Chicago police and urban gun fire. There have been two more mass shootings. The first in a predominantly Black grocery store in Buffalo, NY by a white supremacist 18-year-old white male radicalized by the current climate of antiracism repression—a slow but definite scaling back of the wins fought for by our forebears in the Civil Rights Movement. The second mass shooting was committed by an 18-year-old Latino male in Uvalde, Texas, just outside of San Antonio. The gunman killed 18 elementary school children and two adults. Eyewitness testimony and live news stations covered the standoff—police waited outside the school as the shooter went through classrooms murdering children who were barely younger than my own son, children the

same age as my nieces. To watch as police did nothing--the same police who have been receiving billions of dollars in funding in response to the nationwide protests and demands of the Black Lives Matter movement—while children and teachers were murdered, only solidified for me the urgency around abolition and community uplift. I could not bring myself to watch the grieving parents.

I was faced with a similar scare when 53-year-old Cedric Anderson walked into a San Bernardino classroom armed with a large caliber revolver and opened fire “without saying anything,” killing his estranged wife, 53-year-old Karen Elaine Smith. Smith was a teacher at the school. At the time, my son was attending a San Bernardino elementary school not far from where this occurred, however, media outlets did not give specific details, causing me to panic while I frantically called my son’s father.

I think about these two incidents, and how the media and society understand “mass shootings.” How they sympathize with the trauma of those involved. Then I compare that to the rhetoric that surrounds Black communities that are plagued by gun violence—whether that be by gangs, by police (also a gang), or random disputes with guns. No one considers the trauma Black children in violent areas experience and how it affects them. No one has empathy for Black mothers who lose children. In the court of public opinion, as Black people we are always at fault.

It is because of these interconnected threads that weave our nation together that I cannot separate the personal and the political. They are as entwined as the processes that have set me on the path that I now find myself. This dissertation was born out of what felt like a constant scream into a void. It is the product of the continual battle cry that “Black

Lives Matter,” but we should never forget to “Say Her Name,” and that there must always be space for “Me Too.” This dissertation was born out of anger, but anger is also generative. It was born out of fear, which can also be productive. It was born out of the personal, which is also the political. There is so much of me in this dissertation because, as Toni Morrison writes in Joy James’ *Seeking the Beloved Community*:

I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams-- which is to say, yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That’s a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it’s tainted. My feeling is just the opposite; if it has none, it is tainted.

Part of it is also some form of survivor’s guilt; there is a place inside that says that it could have been me, the same way it *was* my cousin Dorian, at just 14 years old. But mostly, it was born from the great respect I hold for the ways Black women constantly face insurmountable odds and violence and are expected to either succumb or endure. The stories found in my dissertation reflect the types of violence Black women in Chicago, and the United States broadly, face daily. It forces us to reckon with the misogynoirist nature of the relationship between the state and the violence that Black women experience in Chicago.

Black women have suffered from and resisted various forces of gendered and racialized oppression in the Americas since they were stolen from the shores of Africa, fighting incessantly against the heterosexist, patriarchal, racist social order that has

subjugated them. This duality of oppression and resistance has had a cumulative effect on Black women's subjectivity, informing how Black women actively create and sustain relationships with one another in order to fight against their oppression, exclusion, invisibilization, and the various forms of violence they experience. Due to this, Black women in Chicago understand that it is only through a Black feminist, queer praxis that we will all be free. Their spatial practices provide a glimpse into the ways Black women's identities both transform and are transformed by cityscapes and statecraft, how this influences their political behaviors, and how they strategically respond to state and urban violence. In this way, abolition is only really possible when there are coalitions – an intimate understanding of the interconnectedness of movements. Specifically, an epistemological frame that considers the ways that sex work and community organizing are oppositional spaces that push back against the state in important ways and exposes the spaces and cycles of violence communities at the margins experience. Additionally, situating sex work and community activism in this way, allow us to see the spaces of radical possibility community organizers and individual people are imagining, creating, and implementing. That is, *urban marronage*. My dissertation argues that sex work and sex worker activism provide insight into the connections between the criminalization of Black women, access to public space/the right to the city, police violence and state neglect, and citizenship

Urban marronage provides multipurpose spaces and sites of resistance as communal connection and relationality through offerings of healing, spirituality, creativity, and political agency. The multidimensional nature of the Black condition requires a

multifaceted approach to liberation. It is through marronage—already an assertion that one can alter the sociopolitical relations which conditions one's being—that Black communities can envision and work toward (through Black queer feminist praxis and abolition) a future they belong to as full citizens.

Absent from national discussions on violence in the inner city are the conditions that produced them: the CIA bringing drugs into the Black inner city and the subsequent war on drugs, the assassination of prominent Black leaders, welfare reform, the war on poverty, and constant divestment and ostracization of these communities (e.g., Webb 1996). Or, the ways that the divestment of community resources such as schools, jobs, healthcare, etc by the state leaves the most vulnerable populations to fend for themselves through informal labor. Despite what others say or think—politicians and those who do not want radical change or want to control the way change comes about. I did not accept that my anger was not a valid response to ongoing state terror. In fact, this anger was part of what motivated me to begin my research in Chicago. The other part of what motivated me was the love and pride I felt for my family and the women and femmes of Chicago that I knew were making immense sacrifices along with shouldering a city's worth of burdens as they tried to bring about change in Chicago. I refused to accept generalizations about Black women and Black communities being violent, lazy, hypersexual, and criminal.

Throughout my dissertation, I highlighted the ways that Black spatial and relational practices that constitute homemaking and marronage as exhibited by organizations headed by Black women and Black Latinas on the South and West sides of

Chicago. Their forms of resistance demonstrate the relationship between the invisible violence against Black women, femmes, and non-men, abolition (thoughts of a future free of carceral systems), and Black women's commitment to their community and city. One of the limitations of this chapter is not illuminating the emotional labor involved in caring for communities often falls to those who embody (are essentially "mammy-fied") what is seen as maternal; these are most often women (cis and trans), femmes, and those who are dark-skinned and fat. Even within the organizations I worked with or observed, this seemed to be the case. During the events with Let Us Breathe, it was always women who cared for the children (LUB also encouraged those who were non-Black to care for the children so that Black and Indigenous people of color could be present and fully engaged). For my future research, I will include this very important aspect, as the type of affective relationship Black women and femmes have to their communities and organizations can also be a site of violence.

Another area I will include in my future book is conducting interviews with Black trans women. Due to the limitations (temporal, financial) I was unable to contact and work with the Black transwoman led organization Brave Space Alliance. Focusing on Black trans women will bring another important dimension to the inability to access spaces that are deemed for the public and how queer Black bodies are policed in Chicago. I am especially interested in spaces created by Black trans women for safety and support.

Black women and femmes shouldering the responsibilities of care in addition to creating spaces of freedom is nothing new. As Ella Baker states, "*The struggle is eternal. The tribe increases. Somebody else carries on.*" Indeed, Black women know quite a bit

about how to carry on. As the Combahee River Collective mentions, communities at the margins of multiple identities have an analysis of state power in a way that can illuminate what is happening, but also offer pathways and strategies for survival, dismantling these oppressive structures, and liberation. What my research aims to do is demonstrate how these strategies that Combahee theorized, are practiced in 21st century Chicago.

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