BURNOUT, SELF-CARE, AND NEOLIBERALISM: TRACING THE PROMISE OF RELATIONAL, EMERGENT ONTOLOGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

by

BRIANA M. BIVENS

(Under the Direction of Elizabeth A. St. Pierre)

ABSTRACT

In this community-based, philosophical experiment in thought, I engaged Foucauldian philosophies of neoliberalism as well as posthuman and Black feminist relational ontologies to show how burnout and self-care discourses in community organizing have been co-opted by neoliberalism. I positioned the threat of neoliberal co-optation as an ontological problem and explored how *relational, emergent ontologies* might activate conceptual and practical possibilities for more sustainable community organizing. Specifically, I offered *care for the relation* as a way of caring that is accountable to our entangled becomings, and I considered the relational, emergent *micro-utopic practices* that some organizers already engage to show that neither neoliberalism nor Cartesian ontology is totalizing and that community organizing can be one such site for subversive ways of being. To support this philosophical inquiry, I drew on my own encounters in community organizing spaces, as well as individual and group conversations I facilitated with community organizers about how they've moved through stuck places in their organizing and how they imagine sustainable community organizing engagements. By

bringing an ontological analysis to burnout and self-care, I showed how even some of the concepts that circulate in progressive organizing spaces are antagonistic toward the collectivist ethos to which many progressive organizing efforts subscribe. This project troubles, extends, and contributes to the activist burnout studies literature in two primary ways: (1) by positioning the concepts of burnout and self-care in neoliberal discourse, I showed how these concepts reinscribe a particular individualist subject that forecloses possibilities for thought and action, and (2) through situating this discourse within Cartesian humanism, I challenged the innocence of these concepts and invested ontology with a foundational animacy through which entire worlds and political futures can be imagined, constructed, and lived. This dissertation offers a glimmer of hope about the viability of aligning our processes and practices in progressive organizing settings with the world(s) we desire.

INDEX WORDS: burnout; self-care; neoliberalism; ontology, sustainability; activism

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DEDICATION

To the abolitionists, workers, mothers, educators, caregivers, writers, and thinkers in the American South who – across generations – have organized and agitated for more just, life-affirming futures. I am thankful for and indebted to your visionary teachings.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"In addition to community building, we can transform our world by imagining it differently, dreaming it passionately via all our senses, and willing it into creation."

(Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 20)

"Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to 'normality,' trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality." (Roy, 2020)

Preamble

To *write* during these times of viral pandemic as a way to shape the future, when the future feels so tenuous, slipping between my fingers like air, is challenging, to say the least. The coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19, has devastated lives and communities while also exposing deep fissures where something new, something more just might emerge. The pandemic is revealing problems many have known intimately all too well for much too long about the insufficiencies and abuses of capitalism; the racism, sexism, and classism that inhere in health care access and delivery; and the unjust disparities in work valuation and compensation.

At the same time, we're enduring, bearing witness to, and organizing to fight back in the face of rampant state violence against Black communities and Communities of Color. In musing about how I can possibly write about the conditions that cripple or capacitate progressive community organizing efforts, at a time when so much else feels more urgent, I've come to realize that in fact, some of the same logics of domination that threaten sustainability in community organizing are the very logics whose flaws are on full display in this time of collective global crisis. The material-discursive[1] forces that enable overwork, immobilizing degrees of conflict, and martyr mentality in movements working for social justice are the same as those whose decades of entrenchment have made this crisis all the more deadly, violent, and shocking. Yet these troubling times have also jolted so many of us out of our routine attachments and notions of the normal and activated attention to how we might construct our collective future(s) otherwise. To attend to questions of sustainability and political possibility that have haunted me for many months *now*, to engage in this sort of groping *toward*, during such a momentous break from the normal, feels both uncertain and promising.

Making My Way Here: A Personal Telling of Burnout in Community Organizing

I've lived in this same southern town far longer than I ever thought I would. I've grown accustomed to the sticky heat of the summer, the sound of college baseball games around the corner from my house, and the year-round slate of art and music festivals that showcase local creativity. More importantly, I've grown to love the people here and the local grassroots energy for political change that has surged since the 2016 election of Donald Trump. I'm here because my earlier graduate studies in educational policy and

[1] Following Barad (1999), I define material-discursive as "the inseparability of the material and the discursive" (p. 8).

critical studies prompted me to think about how the theory I was learning in the academy connected to everyday struggles to build a more just world. And I'm here because what began as one march against discrimination (my first march ever in January 2016) turned into an ever-accelerating commitment to local grassroots movements struggling for social, racial, and economic justice. In less than three months after that critical march, I was devoting several hours a week to activism – attending meetings, writing blog posts, registering voters, and soaking in all the information I possibly could from my new peers about local politics, theories of change, and social movements. Since then, my activism has deepened and changed shape as I increasingly focused my efforts on the two key activities Carruthers (2018) described as *community organizing*: "developing leaders and strategizing to take action" (p. 89) as I moved into positions of leadership in various political advocacy organizations and progressive electoral campaigns. I made fast friends and for the first time in my life, I had a social circle built around shared intellectual and political commitments. I decided to stay in this town and only apply to a Ph.D. program at the local university because I couldn't imagine abandoning this work I found so meaningful and the relationships I wanted to grow and nurture.

Yet in early 2019, the very community organizing work that had brought me revolutionary joy, community, and purpose for the previous three years became mired in unresolved conflict, martyr mentality, and distrust. Not only was I thinking, "it doesn't have to be this way," but I also found myself obsessing over possible remedies, most of which would require taking a pause from public campaigns and initiatives and instead directing our attention at organizational practices, policies, culture, and relationships. I became adamantly invested in the idea that we should reproduce in our organizing

settings the type of world we struggle to create, and for me, that meant escaping the numbness and resentment that had crept into my relationship with organizing. Yet, the very conditions that made it difficult to make any collaborative decisions were the same ones that served as barriers in efforts to pursue a sort of redirection toward relational care and healing. So, in July 2019, I disengaged from many of my community organizing commitments and resigned as coordinator of the local political organization I was working with at the time. It was a move born of desperation and of absolute necessity if I were going to regain a sense of self-worth, connectedness, and motivation that I had lost at an accelerated pace in just a few short months' time.

My experience is not at all unique, unfortunately, and too many organizations and movements engaged in varying kinds of justice work fall short of their potential because activists and organizers plagued by the overwork, conflict, and the slow pace of change that threaten many efforts at transformative change disengage. Chen and Gorski (2015) described this occurrence as "activist burnout," the debilitating mental, emotional, and physical effects of social change work that force activists to back away, at least temporarily, from what they consider to be their life's work. Symptoms of burnout can accumulate and intensify over time and can include feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, resentment, self-deprecation, and deteriorating physical health (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Wettlaufer, 2015). These effects can culminate in a breaking point where one reaches a total inability to cope with even those tasks and encounters that once seemed manageable or enjoyable. Scholars in disciplines ranging from psychology to sociology who have studied burnout in people working for social justice have attributed the phenomenon to a host of different causes, including infighting within activist

organizations (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Gomes, 1992; Gorski, 2019; Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, & Rising, 2019; Plyer, 2009); cultures of self-sacrifice within movement settings that deprioritize or shame self- and community-care strategies (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Rodgers, 2010); the slow and tiring pace of change; racism, patriarchy, and exclusion within movements (Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Erakat, 2019); and others. Despite my own encounters with what I had, at the time, classified as "burnout," I continued to believe in community organizing as a site for transformative change and grew invested in identifying the material-discursive conditions that make burnout and its common self-care antidote possible.

The Trouble with Burnout Discourse

While burnout as a concept can be helpful for giving shape to a cluster of affects associated with exhaustion and disengagement, some of the literature on activist burnout tends to be concerned with forwarding neat pictures of cause and effect or individualized solutions, sometimes resorting to overly simplistic frameworks that reinforce hard dualisms and Cartesian splits (i.e., Chen & Gorski, 2015; Pines, 1994). Gorski (2019), for example, in his analysis of burnout in racial justice activists, distinguished between "in-movement" and "structural" causes of burnout, characterizing in-movement causes as those relating to how activists treat one another and structural causes as those attributable to forces like racism and white supremacy. Admirably, he emphasizes a need to attend to how structural oppression manifests in activist spaces (i.e., racism from white activists toward Activists of Color), but still maintains these categorical schemas to communicate difference of form and scale. While such classificatory moves can serve as helpful heuristics for making sense of a complicated concept like activist burnout, analyses like

these risk undervaluing the complex ways such "in-movement" and "structural" dimensions are in fact co-constitutive, parts of a complex web of entangled, material-discursive processes. And in that way, they run the risk of concealing how many community organizing arrangements, despite their commitment to social, economic, and/or racial justice, aren't immune from reproducing the racialized and gendered logics of neoliberalism I attend to in this dissertation.

Relatedly, when it comes to interventions for how to prevent burnout and sustain activist commitment, some of the activist burnout scholarship commits a similar error, highlighting *individual* acts of self-care and resiliency in the face of the threat of burnout. Much of the existing activist burnout literature, by focusing on individualized strategies for burnout prevention, reproduce the tendency to look to individual interventions as sufficient for mitigating what are in fact complex and collective material-discursive relations. Gorski (2015) and Fox-Hodess (2015) both emphasize the capacity of personal mindfulness practices in sustaining activist commitments and mitigating burnout. Driscoll's (2020) study similarly elevates self-care strategies like spending time in nature as a mechanism for environmental activists' personal persistence in the environmental movement. While self-care work can be an important strategy for obtaining immediate relief from the pressures of life under capitalism (or life under productivist pressures in anti-capitalist spaces, even), they ultimately replicate the classic neoliberal ruse of placing the burden on the individual to figure out ways to cope in a political and economic arrangement that weaponizes individualism to evade collective accountability. I aim, then, for this dissertation to serve as just one response to Gorski's (2019) call for further study that "examine[s] whether this individualistic approach to burnout [self-care

as a burnout remedy] might reflect the competitive, uncooperative conditions within movements to which many participants attributed their burnout" (pp. 681-2).

Some of the existing literature does emphasize the importance of community and social supports in preventing burnout in social justice organizing settings. Nepstad (2004), for example, in her study on the persistence of activists in the Plowshares movement, showed how the leadership's commitment to fostering a culture of communality and social support led to the activists' long-term persistence. The Plowshares movement not only offered several opportunities for deepening relationship between Plowshares activists and the movement leaders and among all movement participants but also provided child care and communal living space for those activists who needed or wanted it. Plyler (2006), similarly, noted that "sustainable movements are ones that foster community through the collective creation of culture and social space" (p. 13). But these studies that focus on interventions that movements can make to sustain the work do not address the ontological assumptions underlying burnout discourse that produce burnout and its attendant conceptual supports in the first place.

Engaging the Problem and Its Attendant Curiosities

In this community-based, philosophical experiment in thought, I engaged Foucauldian philosophies of neoliberalism as well as posthuman and Black feminist relational ontologies to show how burnout and self-care discourses have been co-opted by neoliberalism and explored how relational, emergent ontologies might activate

conceptual and practical possibilities for more sustainable community organizing[2]. To support this philosophical inquiry, I drew on my own encounters over the last six years in community organizing spaces, as well as individual and group conversations I facilitated with nine community organizers I know about how they've moved through stuck places in their organizing and how they imagine sustainable community organizing engagements. Ultimately, I argue that burnout and attendant self-care discourse relies on an individualist, neoliberalized notion of the subject that forecloses possibilities for sustainable community organizing. The goal here is not to excuse or normalize the feelings of distress, overwork, and conflict that contribute to what I and many activists and organizers have indeed described as "burnout" but to open up a broader range of conceptual and practical tools for fostering more sustainable and affirmative community organizing relations. With Braidotti (2011), I understand sustainability as "the desire to endure in both space and time" that is concerned with "the construction of possible futures" (p. 296). In other words, sustainability in this sense attends to how we maintain the capacity to keep moving such that we open up new possibilities for what we can imagine, build, and practice together. I am interested in what we might be able to do, think, and imagine for our political future(s) if we lived a relational, emergent ontology, and what happens to neoliberalized concepts like *burnout* in the process. I am curious about this kind of ontology as both a modality by which to escape the closure of Cartesian ontologies that make discourses like neoliberalism possible and a provocation of different political possibilities for thinking about and navigating "stuckness" in

[2] In this dissertation, I address a range of political activities that might also be called "social justice work," "social-movement-building," "liberation work," or "activism." While I and the organizers I spoke with draw on a range of projects and experiences – from serving as a local elected official with an organizing background, to coordinating volunteers, to leading social justice nonprofit organizations, etc. – I use "community organizing" throughout this dissertation to refer to those diverse political activities.

community organizing that honor its tensions and ambiguities *and* affirmatively gesture toward the more just world(s) many progressive organizing communities struggle to create. These lines of thought are important interventions in the field of activist burnout studies because they're oriented toward positioning burnout and self-care as neoliberal discursive formations made possible by Cartesian ontology. By identifying relational, emergent ontologies as a capacitating force for sustainable community organizing, this dissertation rejects the rigidity and individualism that capitalism and neoliberalism promote.

Accountable to Community

My approach to this project is shaped by both a poststructural commitment to deconstruct normative concepts and an investment in and accountability toward progressive community organizing as a powerful, collective lever for shaping more just ethico-political relations. I agree with abolitionist Meiners (2011) in asking, "what if we built networks that moved us to ask – how am I accountable to movements? To a larger collective that is struggling to make a way out of no way?" (p. 562). In this dissertation, I conceptualize "community" as an emergent doing, an enactment of coming together, rather than a signifier for sameness or identity. With Singer (1991), I understand community as "not a referential sign but a *call or appeal*" (p. 125; emphasis added). Community, in this sense, is productive, a relational striving toward the not-yet.

It is in this spirit that, for this project, I collaborated alongside progressive organizers who are engaged in this ongoing project of (re)making community and in envisioning new possibilities for its contours. I spoke with nine community organizers I know who have varying degrees of experience in issue-based and electoral organizing in

the southeastern United States to shape this analysis and to collaboratively produce a set of localized recommendations for cultivating more sustainable community organizing arrangements that these organizers can incorporate in their own settings. The (never-final) stories they shared about their own stuck places in organizing, the relationships that nourish them, and their visions for sustainability in community organizing weave their way throughout my philosophical analysis of burnout and self-care discourses and my ontological musings on more just ethico-political relations in organizing. Also, the resources and considerations that populate Appendix A were born of our conversations and reflect my effort to ensure that this inquiry project produce something concretely beneficial to the organizers whose work, I believe, has the power to shape more just futures. I have purposefully constructed this project for/with this local community – my home – to which I owe so much.

The Pages to Come

Before proceeding, I offer a glimpse of what's to-come in this lengthy production, sketching the contours of this attempt to trouble neoliberalized burnout and care discourse and to foster sustainable community organizing engagements. In chapter two, I detail my collaboration with the organizers who gave life to this project. I describe, too, my approach to this project as a *community organizing effort*, drawing from the work of scholar activists and from post qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2011a) to rethink the concepts *data, method,* and *accountability* in research. Then, in a series of three chapters, I place musings from the organizer-collaborators who participated in this project in conversation with scholarly and activist theorizing about neoliberalism, care, and relational, emergent ontologies.

In chapter three, I think with critical feminisms (i.e., Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011) and theorists across the Foucauldian current (i.e., Brown, 2015; Foucault, 1979/2008; Hong, 2015b) who conceptualized neoliberalism as governmentality to position burnout and self-care as concepts circulating in progressive political discourse that construct the individual as the source of and solution to burnout's related affects. I theorize neoliberalism's individualized subject as a modality of control disguised as the freedom of personal choice and show how this neoliberalized subject shrouds material-discursive conditions; oversimplifies the creative ways organizers navigate tensions, conflicts, and ambiguities; and diminishes notions of collective responsibility.

In chapter four, I draw from my own experience as a community organizer, contemporary social movement thinkers and organizers (i.e., brown, 2017; Montgomery & bergman, 2017), and feminisms across post and critical currents (i.e., Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2011; Gumbs, 2020; Wynter, 2003) to explore how *relational, emergent ontologies* can support a disentangling of burnout and self-care discourses from the grip of neoliberal logic and open up different conceptual and political possibilities for a *collective moving through* rather than an individual practice of simply coping. Specifically, I offer *care for the relation* as a way of caring that is responsive to our entangled becomings, and I consider the relational, emergent *micro-utopic practices* that some organizers engage to show that neither neoliberalism nor Cartesian ontology is totalizing and that community organizing can be one such site for subversive ways of being. This reconceptualization invites attention to the more expansive set of relations that constitute the multiple affective experiences burnout seeks to describe, thereby animating responses to tension in organizing settings that distribute responsibility more

broadly and enable a greater degree of alignment between organizing practices and the anti-oppressive politics to which many progressive organizing efforts subscribe.

In chapter five, I offer a set of considerations for and implications of this ontological refiguring for activist burnout studies and community organizing. These implications are relevant not only for creating a more complex theoretical rendering of activist burnout in the service of sustainability but also for naming and abolishing material-discursive arrangements like neoliberalism that have the sinister capacity to creep about and colonize daily life and visions for what's possible. In Appendix A, I showcase educational resources about sustainability I designed and curated in conversation with the organizer-collaborators whose time, vulnerability, and compassion made this project possible. Specifically, I highlight a handbook for organizers with promising considerations for deepening sustainability in community organizing. I also share two sets of Facebook graphics I created – one highlighting common stuck places that the organizers I spoke with mentioned and another sharing considerations for more sustainable organizing. I offer these materials not only in alignment with a scholar activist sensibility but also with the hope they might support a subversive, *micro-utopic practice* of living and organizing otherwise.

CHAPTER 2

A COMMUNITY-BASED, PHILOSOPHICAL EXPERIMENT IN THOUGHT

Introduction

I am not interested in assigning a methodology to this project; I agree with Law (2004) that hegemonic methods and methodology fail to account for partiality and risk imposing "a set of constraining normative blinkers" (p. 4) that prevent the level of movement and adaptability I have worked to retain for this philosophical engagement and community-based inquiry. Rather, I've constructed this inquiry in alignment with a few key ethico-political commitments, inspired by poststructural theories and grassroots organizing and scholar activist practices, that guided how I engage(d) with this project. I don't intend to imply a totalizing rejection of method or to be "thinking without method" (Jackson, 2017). As you'll see, I am not averse to mapping out next steps or weaving together parts of disparate methodologies in "disjunctive affirmation" (Foucault, 1998, p. 355). Instead, I worked to dislodge this inquiry from the normative by "taking ethics as the starting place" (TallBear, 2014, p. 5) and organizing this project in accordance with deeply-held ethico-political concepts. In this chapter, I begin by outlining post qualitative inquiry and scholar activism, both of which offered an invitation to approach this dissertation project as an *effort in community organizing* alongside people, problems, and theories *already in my life*. Then, I explain the ethico-political commitments that guided how I designed the project, before turning to a description of the community of organizers I engaged and our processes for thinking and learning together.

Post Qualitative Inquiry

Over the course of this project, I've endured, and nearly crumbled beneath, a range of amorphous pressures to assign a category, a singular "theory" and "methodology" to a process that isn't nearly so tidy as to fully approximate its categorical ideal (Butler 1993/2011a). The result has been one of immobilization as I grapple with the mandates of what St. Pierre (2011a) called "conventional humanist qualitative inquiry" (p. 613) and Brinkmann (2015) "Good Old-Fashioned Qualitative Inquiry" (p. 620), and my deep, almost petulant, desire to stop treating my academic work as something wholly other than the work of my life. When I began my doctoral program, the thought of conducting "research" and writing a god-knows-how-long dissertation about it haunted me. Having had little formal training in quantitative or qualitative research, I couldn't quite grasp what it meant to inquire in the linear and formulaic way I imagined the social sciences required.

My exposure to and learning about post qualitative inquiry offered a reprieve from these pressures, an invitation to conceptualize inquiry differently. Post qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2011a) emerged as an approach to inquiry committed to "dislodg[ing] the taken-for-granted" (St. Pierre, 2017, p. 39) in conventional humanist qualitative research. St. Pierre (2012) showed how conventional research categories are not only structured by positivist logic and how quantitative ideals got mapped on to qualitative inquiry but also how these categories are *constructions* that have endured for so long that "we've forgotten we made them up!" (St. Pierre, 2010, p. 2). Critical and postmodern scholars have long critiqued this invention (the qualitative research enterprise), challenging its positivist assumptions (i.e., Harding, 1987; Lyotard, 1979; Steinmetz,

2005; St. Pierre, 2012), interrogating the unequal power relationships between researcher and researched and the subject/object binary itself, exposing the coloniality of research and associated epistemic violence (i.e., Dotson, 2014; Lugones, 2010), and even deconstructing its foundational concepts (i.e., Law, 2004; MacLure, 2013; Pillow, 2003; Roulston & Shelton, 2015; St. Pierre, 1997; St. Pierre, 2009; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). In other words, qualitative research methodology has never been a given; it's always been a messy and contested domain. In this project, I probe this contestation as a site of possibility for inquiring differently.

In aligning itself with poststructural and posthuman theories, post qualitative inquiry affirms the deconstructive project of inquiring into the "'operation' of our most familiar gestures" (Spivak, 1967/1974, p. xiii) to expose their "contingent foundations" (Butler, 1992). Accordingly, the philosophical thrust of post qualitative inquiry is a deep suspicion of the humanist subject and the attendant onto-epistemological "grid of intelligibility" (Foucault, 1979/2008, p. 243) that categorizes, individuates, and hierarchizes knowledge and bodies – the Enlightenment era's trace. In the context of qualitative inquiry, this means a refusal and reimagining of foundational research concepts like data and method.

Deconstructing Data

St. Pierre (2013a) critiqued the notion of "*brute data* […] that can be accumulated into regularities, generalities, scientific laws of the social world that emulate the scientific laws of the natural world" (pp. 223-224; emphasis added). This treatment of data as discrete and isolated entities is evidenced by qualitative research's call to code, thematize, and extract and extrapolate findings. In traditional qualitative research

methodologies, data includes things like field notes, interviews, observations, focus group interviews, and other quite formalized, bounded encounters with the world. While these kinds of planned, structured engagements have led to countless theoretical and practical contributions that have surely shaped the world for the better, and I don't mean to suggest that this kind of research should stop, I can't help but wonder what it might be/look/feel like to *also* value another, more humble kind of encounter with the world, one less guided by the dictates of conventional qualitative methodology and more open to the gifts and surprises of daily life. For me, this is what makes post qualitative inquiry's approach to data so alluring.

Before ever having coined the term *post qualitative inquiry*, St. Pierre (1997) deconstructed *data* in traditional qualitative methodology and offered "transgressive data" as a way of thinking about and honoring those messy, nonlinear, unanticipated encounters that shape the inquiry process but that are "uncodable, excessive, out-of-control, out-of-category" (p. 179). Specifically, she described emotional data, dream data, sensual data, and response data as additional modalities for accounting for the diverse scenery of happenings that exceed and evade conventional, interpretive data collection tools or analysis. In other words, a more expansive conceptualization of data invites attention to the many forces that animate our lives – histories, dreams, emotions, and more – and curiosity about the new capacities and possibilities that might emerge (Anzaldúa, 2015; St. Pierre, 1997; St. Pierre, 2013a). I view this effort as a radical opening, a necessary shirking of convention, and an invitation to tune in to the quiet murmurings, the soft vibrations, the whisperings of lives and worlds past and to-come.

Deconstructing Method

Post qualitative inquiry also takes a deconstructive approach to method, with some scholars suggesting "thinking without method" (Jackson, 2017), using "concept as method" (Colebrook, 2017), and crafting "a new culture of method" that is "accountab[le] to complexity and to the political value of not being so sure" (Lather, 2013, p. 642). Post qualitative inquirers are often curious, too, about identifying *theory* as the thrust of doing inquiry rather than a linear series of steps that prioritizes representational frameworks and method over movement. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) offered "plugging one text into another" (p. 1) as a practice for organizing our inquiry around theory and philosophy and getting curious about how conventional data points (i.e., interview transcripts), "transgressive data" (St. Pierre, 1997), and theory transform and co-constitute each other. Common among these approaches is their striving toward multiplicity, an effort to dislodge the inquiry process from high-stakes blueprints and what St. Pierre (2019), quoting Mary Daly, called "methodolatry" (p. 11).

These lines of thought have been useful as I conceptualized this dissertation inquiry as a relational, emergent becoming that is never final or static but instead shifts, dodges, and forms connections that elide steady categorical schemas.

Scholar Activism

Early on in my doctoral studies, I primarily took critical theory courses that reoriented my thinking about what it means to be, to know, and to relate. I read across feminist, poststructural, and posthuman theories *first*, and it was these bodies of work – and their critiques of Enlightenment-era, white, heteropatriarchal, and positivist onto-epistemologies and methodologies – that stuck. At the same time, I was actively engaged

in grassroots leftist political organizing where I heard often from community members about their frustration with the exploitative, detached research practices of the local government and of the very institution where I myself was being trained as a researcher. They mentioned "survey fatigue" and told me that the stale sequence of policy change and "community improvement" efforts goes something like this: (1) a committee is formed to research a pressing problem, (2) an out-of-town consultant is brought in to guide the process, (3) the "community" is surveyed, (4) a report is drafted, (5) the elected officials who created the committee cycle out or move on to the next thing, and (6) the report gathers dust on a shelf and leads to little, if any, concrete material changes for the people – often working-poor and People of Color – whose lives served as "data." One of the organizers I spoke with as part of this project, Harriett[3], who has served as director for a local economic justice and civic engagement nonprofit for over a decade, expressed frustration with this all-too-familiar process, noting that she helped conduct a local economic development study in the 1990s only for the local government to conduct their own studies and call for even *more* studies, even though they "never did the things on the other studies." It's these twin encounters, with critical and post theories and with community organizing, through which I grappled with criticisms like the one above about institutionalized knowledge production that shaped what I consider to be an imperative to inquire in more just and adaptable ways. I've found an invitation and inspiration in scholar activism to forge a thoughtful and accountable intimacy between my political organizing work and my life as a scholar in the academy and to rethink to whom scholarship is accountable.

[3] The names of the organizers included herein are pseudonyms. I gave everyone the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym; five organizers indicated a pseudonym they wanted me to use and the other four gave their consent for me to choose.

"Scholar activism" connotes a range of different activities and goes by a variety of names, including public scholarship or public sociology (i.e., Giles, 2008; Stacey, 2004), participatory action research, activist scholarship (i.e., Hale, 2008), and community-engaged research, just to name a few. Hale (2008) acknowledged that the literature claiming any one of these names is often "of the 'container' variety" characterized by "attempts first to stake out definitional ground and then to establish rules, procedures, and best practices, often in the tone of a 'how-to' manual" (p. 3). Of course, the imposition of wholesale frameworks and specific rules and procedures is precisely what I've sought to avoid throughout this project. Instead, scholar activism has been useful to my mode of inquiring in two specific ways: (1) It's offered license for me to weave together political organizing (both my own experiences and the work of progressive social movement leaders and thinkers) with academic theorizing and social science inquiry (and to challenge the constructed boundary between them), and (2) It supplants the notion of research as accountable to the "discipline" – or what McKittrick (2021) described as "the act of relentless categorization" (p. 35) – and to the demands of the neoliberalized academy with a vision of accountability rooted in communities struggling for justice.

Disrupting the Scholar/Activist Binary

Deeply influential in my approach to this inquiry project have been activists who hold faculty positions in the academy *and* participate in and theorize political activism. In a set of considerations about scholar activism, Pulido (2008) noted that "how you combine scholarship and activism is linked to how you construct your life" (p. 346), an insight that particularly resonated as I stumbled around grasping for hints as to how I

could possibly make this project mean something more than a steppingstone for my professional career. In an article on Black student activism in the academy, Kelley (2016) drew on Moten and Harney (2013), "challeng[ing] student activists to not cleave their activism from their intellectual lives" and recalling "a long history of black activists repurposing university resources to instruct themselves and one another—to self-radicalize, in effect." These notions of melding intellectual and activist selves and of unapologetically *repurposing university resources* in the service of uprooting systems of subjugation shaped my decision to collaborate as part of this dissertation inquiry process with folks in the community where I live, work, and organize – people I know through progressive political organizing, and whose causes I could contribute to using the time, resources, and educational capital afforded me in/through my position in the academy.

Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey (2009) articulated their usage of the term "activist scholarship" as a way to "resist the tendency to separate out the two terms, as if academics carry out activist work 'on the side,' outside of their scholarly work" (p. 3). While I applaud efforts to showcase the interconnectedness of the work, I also take seriously the cautionary reminders of Meiners (2013) and Rodriguez (2017/2007) who warned of the nonprofit industrial complex's complicity with the carceral state, an insight which is useful for thinking about how institutions of higher education that are invested in democratic, assumptively progressive politics can, in fact, enable the "*ongoing absorption* of organized dissent" (Rodriguez, 2017/2007, p. 23). Extending this critique, Kelley (2016) ultimately argued against a brand of student activism whose aim is to *reform* the academy in accordance with multicultural liberalism and instead endorsed a subversive, abolitionist approach, conceptualizing the academy as a well-resourced site

that can support efforts to create political change *outside* of the academy itself. I mention all this to suggest that there's a risk of co-optation or moderation by the neoliberalized, careerist university model when we talk about blending scholarly and activist efforts, and so it's crucial that we address to whom our scholar activist efforts are accountable and for what purpose.

Accountable to Communities

The body of work I'm classifying as "scholar activist" has been central to my thinking, in part, because of the way many intellectuals who are also actively invested in community organizing rethink the core role and function of academic research. Pulido (2008) advised that "[a]ccountability requires seeing yourself as *part* of a community of struggle, rather than as the academic who occasionally drops in" (p. 351), a reassuring claim that offered justificatory license for my speaking with people in my own emergent political organizing network as one of the data clusters for this dissertation research project. A shift in our notions of accountability from academic conventions and institutions to social movements reshapes not only the questions we ask but also how we conceptualize, design, and distribute our research. This approach to accountability has epistemological implications, as well, in that it regards the theories, practices, and histories of frontline organizing communities as powerful sites of knowledge-making and invites an elevation of grassroots praxis in scholarly inquiry. It, too, suggests a deep sense of responsibility to those working to dismantle relations of subjugation and "imagine a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions" (Davis, 2003, p. 107) that we may not yet have the language or tools to describe. These scholar activist notions, coupled with post qualitative reimaginings of traditional qualitative research, support an approach

to organizing inquiry that is attentive to the ethics and politics of relating, inquiring, and crafting futures together.

On Ethico-Political Commitments as Organizing Principles

My approach to this dissertation project as an effort in community organizing rather than a method-driven research study compels a description of the ethical and political commitments that shape how I tend to engage in this kind of work. Montgomery and bergman (2017) described "rigid radicalism" (p. 185) as a common impulse in leftist organizing spaces to be so firmly rooted in particular political ideals so as to reject competing perspectives and to shame those not aligned with a particular narrow conception of ethics and politics. I bring this up to highlight that I certainly don't wish to suggest that the ethico-political commitments I describe here are in any way pure, static, totalizing, or undeniably "right." And as I'll show throughout the course of this chapter, even in my sincerest attempts to do inquiry "differently," I still, at times, fell into the trap of reproducing the normative logics whose very grasp I was trying to escape. Below, I'll describe four ethico-political commitments – which have emerged through my engagements with post qualitative inquiry and scholar activism and their attendant philosophical assumptions – that shaped how I designed and approached this project.

Messiness and Partiality

As it relates to both this inquiry process and any attendant "data," I agree with St. Pierre (1997) that "we must learn to live in the middle of things, in the tension of conflict and confusion and possibility" (p. 176). I have to be willing and prepared, in other words, to navigate untidy processes, (always already) partial perspectives, and multiple shifts. That means transgressing disciplinary and methodological bounds and refusing capture

by a singular research paradigm that imposes rules and limitations. This sort of loitering has not only enabled me to move through/with the project from a place of curiosity (rather than obligation), but has also, in unexpected ways, inspired a sort of "magical thinking" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 4) where my own imagination and other forms of thinking and being not traditionally valued in academic research have played an active role. The messiness offers a sort of freedom to adapt and experiment, to "balanc[e] several books, or several passages, or several ideas, or several textures, at the edge of a desk, on the floor of the studio, and wonde[r] how else they might come together, and what else, together, they might do" (Manning, 2016, p. 39). To embrace messiness and partiality in this way is to take seriously all the excesses and oddities of inquiring together, to treasure contradictions and ambiguities, and to develop a certain attentiveness and sensitivity to the diverse ways we all contribute to inquiry.

Relational Organizing

I conceptualized this project not as a strictly academic endeavor but as an effort in community-building and community organizing invested in trusting, collaborative, and care-ful encounters with one another. Southerners on New Ground (n.d.), a regional Queer liberation organization based in Atlanta, Georgia, is just one of many movement organizations with an explicit commitment to relational organizing, an approach anchored in trust, accountability, and care. Similarly, TallBear (2014) posited the "research process as a relationship-building process" (p. 2). As I'll discuss in the following section, the people I spoke with and facilitated roundtables alongside as part of this dissertation inquiry are people I've known and organized with for years (before I ever knew I'd be getting my Ph.D.!). This decision is not merely an act of "convenience

sampling"; it's rooted instead in a deep ethico-political commitment to ensuring my scholarly work is not "on" or "about" exoticized Others but one of many contributions I can make to support communities and causes in which I, too, am invested and embedded. Trust-building requires confronting and tuning in to power relations, establishing group agreements and processes for the collaborative work, and taking the time to get to know one another's stories and needs. These are just a few of the facilitation strategies rooted in care and trust I use in my political organizing work, and my aim was to continue that work in this dissertation project.

Standing With

TallBear (2014) articulated a process of "standing with" as an approach to "inquir[ing] *in concert with*" (p. 1; emphasis added) the communities alongside whom she researches and works. TallBear differentiated this act of "inquiring with" from "reciprocity," which implies a mutually beneficial transaction from differently-situated subjects, characterizing her approach instead as one informed by "shared conceptual ground and shared stakes" (p. 3). The concept of "standing with" is a helpful heuristic for communicating the collaborative and accountable thrust of this project. Collaboration in this sense isn't about "clear[ing] a space for the voice of the authentic subject to be heard" (MacLure, 2011, p. 998); instead, it assumes and demands common investment in a certain type of future.

Material Supports

Butler (2011b) acknowledged the need for "material supports" (p. 3) that make collective action possible. Butler (2015) also theorized the body as that which "cannot be fully disassociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living and

acting" (p. 65) and mused how community organizing infrastructure might help to "safeguard breaks with normality, and offer support and affirmation for those who make those breaks" (p. 33). Butler wrote specifically about lives/bodies in precarity, and it's not a radical extension to suggest that precarity is normative in life under neoliberal capitalism. As such, given that I've approached this project as a scholar activist, community organizing effort, I was invested in securing the material supports that facilitated my collaborators' participation. Disability justice activists have interpreted care as entangled with material support, articulating a commitment to making sure everyone's needs are met and that all are seen and valued in their wholeness and complexity (Mingus, 2018; Lamm, 2015; Sins Invalid, 2015; Showing Up for Racial Justice, n.d.). This includes and goes *beyond* questions of accessibility to embody a commitment to what brown (2017) called "transformative justice," or "transforming the conditions that make injustice possible" (p. 126). Disability justice activist Mia Mingus (2018) advanced a similar sentiment, calling for "liberatory access" aimed at meeting immediate needs for access while also making sure that those same barriers to access don't happen again. I have also been inspired by a list of guiding questions compiled by a disability justice organizer that essentially ask the question: what do we each need to be able to participate most fully (Lamm, 2015)?

The Organizational and Analytical Contours of Our Community-Based Inquiry

My motivation to write a dissertation tracing the neoliberalized contours of burnout and self-care discourse and exploring the possibilities of relational, emergent ontologies for more sustainable community organizing emerged from a cluster of forces, ranging from a deeply emotional longing to probe my own experiences with community

organizing to a gnawing desire to subvert traditional academic research and put "academic" theory in conversation with contemporary social movement theories and practices. As I described earlier, this inquiry comprises a combination of philosophical inquiry, my own encounters over the last six years in community organizing spaces, and conversations with local community organizers. In this section, I focus specifically on the context and process for organizing the empirical, community-based component of this inquiry. I outline my modes of engaging the community organizers with whom I facilitated conversations and analyzing their musings which supported my theorizing around burnout, care, neoliberalism, and ontology.

The Organizer-Collaborators and the Local Context

To help me think about the questions framing this inquiry, I spoke with nine local organizers and advocates I know whose identities span various lines of race, language, nationality, education, gender, and class difference and whose work covers a range of issue areas, from immigrants' rights to educational justice. The small Southern city where all the organizers I spoke with are based is replete with both nonprofit organizations (there are over 400 of them!) that strive to meet various direct service needs and grassroots political organizing arrangements that are not necessarily ensnared in the nonprofit industrial complex. Many people describe the town as a "blue dot in a red state" for its left-leaning political orientation as compared to the surrounding counties and to the state as a whole, which had long been decidedly conservative until organizations led by Black organizers and Organizers of Color facilitated an impressive Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate in 2020. Given this, there's a fair amount of progressive energy in the community that ballooned following the 2016 presidential election, after which hundreds

of people in the city came together for the largest march in its history. Many people got involved in politics for the first time then, new justice-oriented organizations were formed, and existing political organizations fighting for social and economic justice saw their membership increase exponentially.

The folks I collaborated with as part of this project had been engaged in organizing efforts specifically focused on racial, social, and economic justice of some sort, some of them for decades and others only since Trump's election. Some organizers are also now elected officials and have a long history of community-based advocacy. Others have been issue-based organizers agitating for liberation in this city and in Latin America, and some see their political advocacy work as emerging or just beginning. The organizers I spoke with have been involved in efforts to influence local policy, pressure major institutions, elect progressive state and/or local candidates, and/or orchestrate (and win!) their own bids for public office. These collaborators have worked with organizations that are loose networks or coalitions of organizers without formal nonprofit status, issue-based nonprofits with access to grants and other funding sources, and volunteer-run political advocacy organizations that rely on member donations. I believe their insights into the tensions in community organizing and their imaginings for organizing sustainability will resonate with current and future organizers.

I invited this group to participate in co-thinking about burnout and sustainability because, in part, I consider all nine of these organizers to have been deeply influential in the local progressive political landscape. I deliberately invited people who work or have worked with different local organizations, as I found promise in the possibility of our group conversations sparking new emergent connections among these organizations. I

knew them all before facilitating the conversations for this project; some I consider to be close friends, and others I knew but didn't already have a close relationship with. Prior to this project, I had collaborated with all of the organizers in various capacities, from occasional conversations about electoral politics to deep and sustained partnerships working in the same organizations or on the same campaigns. As such, my sense of accountability to this group exceeds mere research accountability; I feel accountable to them as friends, comrades, and fellow residents engaged in efforts to create positive change.

Modes of Engagement

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I met with the organizers using a video conferencing platform, Zoom, with the exception of two organizers whom I met outside, masked, and distanced for individual conversations. During a three-month period, I first facilitated one roundtable discussion to orient everyone to the project before scheduling one-on-one conversations with each organizer and then two more roundtable discussions. As part of the third roundtable discussion, we engaged in collaborative brainstorming about the kinds of resources and materials that would support their work as it relates to burnout and sustainability in organizing, a conversation which shaped the resources I created and shared for the group to use however they'd like (see Appendix A).

Roundtable Discussions. I convened three group roundtable discussions designed to: (1) facilitate space for organizers to talk through turning points, tensions, and surprises in their own community organizing encounters, (2) imagine together the supports we each need to thrive in community organizing settings, and (3) collaboratively brainstorm a set of proposed tools or resources that can support efforts to build more

sustainable organizing efforts. My scholar activist commitments meant that I conceptualized these group discussions not as a "method" I imposed on the communities in which I'm embedded, but as a collaborative and community-driven approach to thinking together. As such, I communicated the meetings as roundtables, a style of facilitated gathering more conducive to the participatory approach I sought to implement. Since I strived to approach this project as an effort in community organizing, I clarified my role as *facilitator* of these meetings, not as "principal investigator" or "researcher," and introduced a set of community agreements to help support an equitable and democratic co-learning space (see roundtable agendas in Appendix B). This meant that I shared my own insights and experiences as well and responded to the same prompts I invited everyone else to engage. I chose to host group roundtable discussions *in addition to* the one-on-one conversations because I think any sustainable interventions will require the upfront buy-in, input, and collaboration of local organizers themselves. A common issue I've witnessed is the tendency for organizations to work in silos, often to the effect of competing for resources or volunteers, struggling to garner broader community support, and often failing to sustain the project or effort long-term. These roundtable discussions were an attempt to mitigate that all-too-common tendency by bringing together organizers from a range of organizations, backgrounds, and experiences to imagine *together* a sustainable future for our shared work.

As for the production of pedagogical resources, we brainstormed these in the third roundtable in which I facilitated a conversation about the kind of guidance folks need to nourish their organizing and advocacy work and the materials, resources, and considerations that would be most helpful for these organizers to bring to their own work.

I affirmed the many possibilities for what could come of these conversations. For example, I suggested that the group could meet more regularly as a coalition to address activist burnout or organize a larger community discussion on the topic. While I invited the group to collaborate with me on the production of resources, there was no immediate interest in that, and the group expressed that it would be most helpful for me to create the resources informed by our conversations. So I put together a set of resources, shared it with the organizers, and amended it based on their feedback. These resources comprise Appendix A.

Individual Conversations. In addition to the roundtable discussions, I facilitated one-hour individual conversations with each of the organizers. I had prepared a list of open-ended questions to guide the conversation which focused on their organizing background; turning points, tensions, and stuck places in their work; relationships that nourish their organizing engagements; the spaces where they work; and moments of joy (see Appendix C). For the most part, we didn't get through all the questions in the hour we had scheduled for the conversation, and I reminded the organizers that my aim was to have a comfortable and natural conversation (we know each other, after all!) and so the questions were just prompts, not conversational mandates.

My choice to conceptualize the conversations as just that – *conversations* – rather than interviews is a political one. This choice aligns with my ethico-political approach to this project as a relational, community organizing effort and as such, my aim was to make our conversations as casual and dialogical as possible. I've never "interviewed" anyone in my prior organizing work and so to call these "interviews" felt both unnatural and confining. In other words, I was hoping they would be similar to the hundreds of one-on-

one conversations about political organizing I've had during the last six years. Further, I do not believe any stories my collaborators shared are complete tellings or static, brute evidentiary fodder to be interpreted and generalized (Scott, 1991), or, as MacLure (2010) noted, "coyly disposed to yield [their] secrets to our penetrating analyses" (p. 278). I agree with Jackson and Mazzei (2012) that "[t]here is nothing pure about what they told us, yet we needed their 'stories' to knead the dynamics among philosophy, theory, and social life to see what gets made, not understood" (p. 3).

I had intended the one-on-one conversations to be more casual affairs over a beer or a cup of coffee. However, the virtual format compelled by the COVID-19 pandemic made some feel more like a meeting than two friends getting together to talk. As a result, some of the one-on-one conversations did feel more like interviews, despite my best efforts to refuse that conventional qualitative method. It seems "the research interview" has become a common structure that can formalize any conversation. In a conversation with one of the organizers I don't know as well as others, I remember feeling that we both could have benefitted from the mundane practices and pleasantries that are often a part of "settling in" together in-person. Instead, I was keenly aware of the passage of time and that she was walking around (and even driving, at one point) while speaking to me. I couldn't rid myself of the notion that she had a billion other, more important, things to do than talk with me. Witnessing her move through everyday life and juggle other responsibilities, I felt a sharp awareness that our conversation was just one of many tasks she had to carry out that day – I was her "one o'clock," if you will. I still wonder whether my own sense of anxiety and my fear that this was in fact more transactional than I had ever wished would have been any different had we had the chance to meet in person and

stumble through all the little steps, the minutiae, the geographic details, of sitting down together for a cup of coffee. And had we met in person, it's entirely possible that while I may have been assuaged of my own insecurities, the competing demands in her life very likely would still have existed but just not been subject to my penetrating gaze. So certainly, my attempt to completely escape the normalized modalities of conventional qualitative research were imperfect – a challenge which I elaborate later in this chapter. Nonetheless, this kind of political project is worth the effort despite the inevitable slippages it entails.

Analytical Movements

To support my analysis, I drew from audio and video recordings to transcribe word-by-word the nine individual conversations and three group roundtable discussions not to fix or stabilize the data but rather because writing (even something as rote as transcription) is another form of processing and knowledge-making for me. Recording the conversations would have felt much more unnatural were it not for COVID-19 plunging us into a co-dependent relationship with technology wherein features like recording a video call are increasingly accessible and normalized. I also spoke with one organizer whose first language is Spanish, so I had an interpreter for all the group conversations and for my individual conversation with her. This interpreter also translated her comments in writing to aid my analysis.

I didn't code the data in any traditional qualitative fashion for at least two reasons: (1) I haven't coded data in my other community organizing efforts, and (2) I agree with MacLure (2013) that coding "is a retroactive, knowledge-producing operation that makes things stand still, and the price of the knowledge gained is the risk of closure and stasis"

(p. 662). In this inquiry project, conversations with community members were not simple data collection activities nor were their responses data to be stabilized, fixed, and manipulated but rather encounters that inspired new thoughts and connections. As a practice of accountability, I did email each organizer with the section(s) of this dissertation where I wrote about our conversations so they could see how I was putting their comments to work and invite them to make any changes or addendums they'd like. Of those who responded, only one requested minor revisions to her comments. In alignment with the *messiness and partiality* ethico-political commitment I described above, I approached these conversations as "always in a process of becoming" (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 717), as *glimpses* that, in all their partiality, messiness, and contradiction, had something powerful to offer nonetheless.

St. Pierre (2011a) described "*the physicality of theorizing*" (p. 622), a useful concept as I unlearn conventional notions of what counts as analyzing and writing and labor to love and listen to all the activities and happenings that made it possible for me to believe I have anything worth writing about here, at the end of the project. I'm under no illusion that the "data" primed for "analysis" comprises only written interview transcripts or field notes, and accordingly, feel inclined to "attend to the strange ontological hauntings of [our] lives" (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 12) that don't necessarily adhere to linear narratives, common-sense explanations, or methodological mandates. I listened to/read the roundtable and one-on-one conversations several times; I jotted down notes on Post-It notes, in notebooks, and in Word documents; I was inspired to read some new texts I hadn't thought about before; I took more quiet walks; and I cleaned my house obsessively – a constellation of everyday practices that informed what I "did" with these encounters

and what "sense" I made of them. I also had more conversations –some with my partner; others with my writing group; and additional, unplanned, non-recorded conversations with some of the folks who participated in the project.

Being isolated during the pandemic certainly contributed to the nature of inquiry during this project. I spent many months frustrated and demoralized about the pandemic-exacerbated suffering in the world and struggled to piece together something that resembled a healthy routine for myself. There were many days I luxuriated in my hobbies and didn't actively think or write about this project; I played too many board games[4] and lost myself in novels, something I haven't enjoyed so much since I was cradled by childhood. Less glamorous are the many nights I was frozen in that liminal space between sleeping and waking, agonizing over this process and wondering whether my project actually matters, especially in a pandemic context where the vast array of inequities is in sharp view. And I *had* to do some of these things, it seems; they helped me to keep going (in fact, they were '*going'*) and to get unstuck from the pressure of performing writing and research in a formulaic way. While I continue to worry that my project may not produce as much positive social change as I'd like, it has been at the very least a concerted striving toward more just ways of relating.

Impure Slippages

The historical and persistent paradox of social justice organizations perpetuating unjust conditions in their own approach to organizing (brown, 2017; Carruthers, 2018; Montgomery & bergman, 2017) reminds me of how difficult it is to escape the complex web of apparatuses that is produced and upheld in the context of "a history that hurts"

[4] My partner and I are board game enthusiasts and I most enjoy those with justice-centered or mystical, whimsical themes. My favorites that I learned and played regularly over the last 15 months are Inuit, Everdell, La Granja, and Mystic Vale. Highly recommend!

(Hartman, 1997, p. 51) and "a past that is not past" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 13), and, I would say, an oppressive apparatus of being that we repeat. It can be extremely difficult to even *imagine* non-normative ways of structuring and engaging with/in the world. Remarking on the challenges of building broad support for an abolitionist politic, Davis (2003) wrote that prisons and police are "considered so 'natural' that it is extremely hard to imagine life without [them]" (p. 10). brown (2017) also commented on the difficult but necessary subversive and visionary work, describing organizing as "science fiction" and suggesting that justice work is about "creating conditions that we have never experienced" (p. 160). The tools available for uprooting, deconstructing, transforming, and building…aren't they already shot through with traces of the dominating logics we're up against? Derrida (1978) described the utility (and to some extent, the inevitability) of employing old concepts as new tools "to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces" (p. 284), suggesting a strategic subversion in the name of abolition. Butler's (1993/2011a) theorization of performativity is also helpful in disrupting notions of *totalizing* oppression or utopic *transcendence* and noticing the messy complexities of engaging with/in the world:

> Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a "pure" opposition, a "transcendence" of contemporary relations of power, but *a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.* (p. 184; emphasis added)

As I seek to give myself some grace when it comes to the fidelity and accuracy with which I've undermined traditional qualitative research, and the extent to which I found

myself inadvertently performing "interviewer" and "researcher," I find some solace in knowing that detaching from naturalized ways of inquiring, being, and relating is *hard work*.

My goal was never to deconstruct conventional qualitative research only to then *replace* it with another set of methodological blueprints. Despite my best efforts to dodge methodological convention at every turn, there were several times that work felt performative, as if it were possible to carve out a space in the world for this project untouched by the sinister, white and patriarchal dictates of Enlightenment-era science. At many points during this project, I felt myself slipping into conventionality as a safeguard, enacting the moves of traditional qualitative research that aren't necessarily in keeping with my vision for approaching this project as a community organizing engagement.

While I decided to record and transcribe the conversations to afford me the luxury of revisiting (and reworking, rethinking, remembering, reinterpreting) them rather than to mine the textual data for a singular and accurate truth, the recording and the transcription served as initial hooks, pulling me into the material-discursive universe of traditional qualitative research. At times, I found myself "performing interviewer" in the individual conversations, trying not to share *too* much about my own organizing life, experiencing frustration when I didn't get through all the guiding questions I'd hoped, and awkwardly transitioning between questions in an attempt to move us along lest we get "off track." Visweswaran (1994) described the "failure" of traditional interpretive methods and associated epistemologies, sharing an example when the impulse to have her tape recorder meant turning down the possibility of a spontaneous conversation:

> Or, more concretely, in emphasizing the tape recorder I had forfeited the trust and spontaneity of a moment of introduction. I had insisted upon my tape recorder, hoping to "capture" women's words, and in so doing was caught by the desire to capture. (p. 97)

While I affirmed my intention for the one-on-one conversations to be comfortable and free-flowing, ultimately, I was the one asking the questions and attempting to leave as much space as possible for the other person to speak. So, many times I was "caught" by the conventions of the formalized interview. In one recorded conversation with a person I consider to be a friend, she said:

> Well, I don't know, I feel like I'd like to talk, and maybe, I don't know, I feel like I don't – I've been, bleh. I've been treating this call as like an interview where I'm just talking, blah blah blah, answering your questions. But [*sighs*] I don't know. […] I guess I'd like to just ask you all the exact same questions you asked me just now, you know? I wish we had another hour and a half where you could just say all that stuff, or whatever, answer things in your own way.

This comment affirmed what I'd already feared: that in spite of my intentions and desire to construct a casual conversation, it had the familiar contours of a traditional interview, and I was indeed "sanitiz[ing] for the sake of disciplinary legitimacy" (Meadow, 2018, p. 155). She mentioned this toward the end of our conversation, and I turned the recorder off about five minutes later (about an hour after we had first started talking). Then, we *did* continue talking – she asked me some questions, I shared stories about my own experiences with conflict in organizing settings, we shared our interpretation of events in which we were both involved, I waved to her baby, and we revealed our anxieties about

not doing *enough* to change a world that often feels so unhinged and unredeemable. This addendum – in addition to the conversations *sans* recorder I had with some of the other organizer-collaborators – was life-giving, a reminder that the goal was and never has been for the recorded conversations to "tell all." Instead, every conversation, every encounter, and the numerous other transgressive data events I described earlier in this chapter are all part of a shifting, emerging, always-partial process of (un)(re)making the world together.

Ruptures: COVID-19

> *"We are touching the future, reaching out across boundaries and post-apocalyptic conditions to touch each other, to call each other out as family, as beloveds."* (brown, 2017, p. 162)

Having spent nearly the last six years of my life deeply engaged with both poststructural theories in the academy and political organizing communities alongside whom I'd muse about possible political solutions to the problems wrought by overlapping social, economic, and racial injustices, I have often worried about the injustices I have either inadvertently justified or utterly failed to imagine. In reflecting on what I can only describe as the near-apocalyptic conditions of 2020, I'm reminded of Spivak's (1993/2009) insight that "what I cannot imagine stands guard over everything that I must/can do, think, live" (p. 25), especially during the pandemic-related cluster of events I certainly could not have imagined. I write these pages nearly one year after the new coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19, compelled communities across the United States to screech to a near-total shutdown. Practices that, for many, constituted key fixtures of daily life (i.e., grocery shopping, going to school/work, hosting mass

demonstrations, eating at restaurants, taking walks outside) became dangerous, risky, and potentially life-threatening. Collegiate and professional sporting events were cancelled mid-game, schools closed, many employees were sent home, domestic and international flights were cancelled, and businesses closed abruptly. At the same time, no one quite knew how contagious or deadly the disease really was or how it spread, and conservatives – emboldened by the racist and inflammatory rhetoric of Donald Trump – were quick to fabricate xenophobic, anti-Asian stories about the origin of the virus. The first several months of 2020 felt nothing short of apocalyptic, and the failures of capitalism the pandemic exposed – in all its racialized, gendered, and ableist contours – will continue to unfold for decades to come.

This context inevitably shaped not only the design of this dissertation project but also my own capacity to perform at the speed and level of efficiency the neoliberalized, competitive university demands. I don't intend this section as a plea to get off the hook for any sort of omissions or failures; I agree with St. Pierre (1997) that "[w]e are always on the hook, responsible, everywhere, all the time" (p. 177) and with Dotson and Spencer (2018) that "[o]ne can gesture to the structural limitations on our work, but that explanation is not an excuse. It just may be the case that good social justice academic work will need to be a genuine, coalitional effort from this point on" (p. 68). Nonetheless, the pandemic impacted the course of this project in ways I couldn't have imagined, and so a few words are in order about how I shifted course accordingly.

I had initially planned to have the conversations in-person. However, the health risk posed by the pandemic meant that I ended up hosting these discussions via Zoom, with the exception of two one-on-one conversations with friends which I hosted in-

person, outdoors, and physically distanced. Before 2020, I had little experience with online facilitation and so felt constrained as far as my ability to practice creative pedagogies in a virtual format and skeptical of my friends' and colleagues' ability to participate fully and comfortably via video conferencing. Nevertheless, we proceeded. I do think the group conversations lost a certain sense of intimacy and conviviality, perhaps due, in part, to the inability to have spontaneous, one-on-one conversations in a virtual group setting and to the reduced level of energy and inspiration that often comes from sharing physical space together. I had also planned to construct an in-person co-learning space where everyone's needs could be met; I was going to provide lunch, child care for those who needed it, and cozy additions to optimize collective inspiration and comfort. While the virtual format meant that I couldn't quite curate the physical space as I had intended, I was able to repurpose the grant money I had set aside for food, space rental, presentation materials, and childcare as stipends for each of the nine people who joined for the group discussions and one-on-one conversation. Despite these challenges, the conversations went on and we engaged, if for just a moment, in the dreamwork of envisioning sustainable futures for our organizing work.

Uncertain Horizons

It's in this context and with these aspirations, then, that I trudged through the process of writing, dreaming, thinking, doing sustainable community organizing. "Writing," said Anzaldúa (2015), "is like pulling miles of entrails through your mouth" (p. 102). I wish she were wrong, but I feel it…the heaviness, the vulnerability, the disgust, the resentment, the immensity of what it means to "write a dissertation." But this is and has always been more than a piece of writing, and writing is and has always been

about more than the movement of pen on paper or shaky fingers on burdened keys. Writing isn't an indulgent exercise for me, and it is rarely enjoyable. It feels insufferable, at times – "the site of my struggle" (St. Pierre, 2009, p. 229). And I recall how writing, for so many, has functioned as a life source, a liberatory exercise, a provocateur of the possible. Lorde (1977) wrote about writing as a source of sustenance and power, acknowledging poetry's creative capacity to "give name to the nameless so to it can be thought. *The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears* are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives" (p. 37; emphasis added). The poem, and I'd venture other genres of writing, too, is a mode of expression that *animates* imaginative perspectives and levers for change that may otherwise have lingered unthought. Maybe it's this – the haunting awareness that this really is about *so much more* – that has made it so difficult for me to write the lines that I finally write now. The *so much more*, though, is also what moves me…the lure of the possible.

CHAPTER 3

ACTIVIST BURNOUT, INDIVIDUALIZED CAREWORK, AND SELF-CARE AS NEOLIBERAL BEDFELLOWS

"The political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our day is not to try to liberate the individual from our economy…but to liberate us both from the economy and from the type of individualization that is linked to the economy. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries." (Foucault, 1982, p. 216)

Introduction

"There's a season for everything," Stephanie said. When I finally developed the courage to resign from my leadership position in the organization where I was doing most of my political organizing work in 2019, I remember getting lots of advice to take care of myself: get a massage, go on a walk, take a bath. It was this piece of wisdom, though – that there's a season for everything – that really stuck with me. Not only did it remind me that there would surely be things to look forward to after I took this necessary step to disengage, but it also disrupted the notion of this move as some sort of permanent severing. It challenged the very paralyzing and linear teleology of organizing, then "burning out," then moving on to other life activities in permanent abandon from political work. It held, too, the promise of (re)turn, of *moving through* instead of *burning out*. The much more common attempts at solace and support from friends and colleagues, though, rested firmly in the self-care current. Self-care discourse, however, focuses on the

individual, the self, and obscures and fails to adequately hold accountable the social and political arrangements (i.e., capitalism, neoliberalism, racism) that produce and exacerbate the conditions that give rise to the need for organized mobilization and "self-care" in the first place. Further, it's commonly constructed as an activity outside of or separate from the practices of everyday life – a luxury, a worthy indulgence. It highlights, too, just how wholly *unsustainable* the conditions of everyday life are for so many that we're to find creative ways to cope so we can keep trudging along. By assigning responsibility to the individual to figure out how to maintain their capacity to labor, to produce, to compete, self-care discourse is complicit in the insidious neoliberal project of individual responsibilization that threatens so much about social and political life, including the power of transformative community organizing.

In this chapter, I begin by outlining my theoretical approach to neoliberalism as a "governing rationality" (Brown, 2015, p. 9) that territorializes conceptions of the subject and of responsibility. In the second section, I sketch the contours of neoliberalism's individualized subject as a modality of control disguised as the freedom of personal choice. In the third and final section, I weave in comments from the organizers I spoke with and draw the connection between these neoliberal governance strategies of control and burnout and self-care, suggesting that burnout and self-care are discursive deputies for neoliberalism. Specifically, I critique the utility of burnout as an explanatory tool given its teleological and individualist assumptions, and I show how neoliberalism has co-opted self-care discourse in the service of capitalistic interests and the tempering of transformative community organizing efforts.

Conceptualizing Neoliberalism as Governmentality

Neoliberalism has become such a ubiquitous analytical approach that it's not always clear what people mean when they invoke it. Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010) described neoliberalism as a "rascal concept" that is "promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested" (p. 1). Brown (2015), too, described the "inconstancy and plasticity" (p. 21) of neoliberalism. In response to this problem of definition, Larner (2000) synthesized three common theorizations of neoliberalism, which she defined as "a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance" (p. 6): neoliberalism as policy, as ideology, and as governmentality. While it's beyond the scope of this chapter to reiterate the contours of these different approaches, Larner's (2000) analysis is relevant because it demonstrates the complexity and partiality of neoliberal projects and constructs neoliberalism not as a "unified and coherent philosophy" (p. 12) but rather a messy, nonlinear "*process* involving the recomposition of political rationalities, programmes, and identities" (p. 16; emphasis added). I agree with Hall (2011) that despite the many critiques of neoliberalism as too amorphous a concept to have any utility, "there are enough common features to warrant giving it a *provisional* conceptual identity" (p. 706). To conceptualize neoliberalism as a governing rationality rather than a totalizing ideology is useful not only for thinking about the myriad ways neoliberalizing technologies attach to seemingly discrete parts of our lives to enable "governing at a distance" (Rose, 1999, p. 154), but also to understand the paradox of neoliberal discourses circulating in progressive movements and organizations working

for justice who, at times, perpetuate neoliberalizing logics in their policies, practices, and ideologies.

With Foucault (1979/2008), I conceptualize neoliberalism as a governing discourse – the "conduct of conduct" – that circulates through all aspects of life and is capable of attaching to already-existing norms, practices, and concepts. By describing neoliberal governmentality as the "conduct of conduct," Foucault was alluding to the way that "government" entails not only the administration of state-based programs, but also functions as a subjectifying tool wherein the "modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence" (Lemke, 2001, p. 191). This relationship is not unlike Foucault's (1975/1995) revamped theory of the Panopticon wherein prisoners who, believing themselves to be under constant surveillance by prison guards, begin to discipline and surveil themselves according to the established rules and expectations. In the case of the Panopticon and of neoliberal governance as Foucault described, the aims and interests of the state are redistributed onto individuals themselves to facilitate their control.

Foucault (1979/2008) also articulated a related component of neoliberal governance that enables this redistributionary move: He described neoliberalism as comprising "a sort of economic analysis of the non-economic" (p. 243) such that relationships in the social world are governed by market logic whose purview once rested solely in the economic domain. Brown (2015) clarified Foucault's position, describing neoliberalism as "an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life" (p. 30). This figuration is unique

in that it positions neoliberalism as a *discourse* that circulates, mutates, and attaches to existing concepts to the effect of "transmogrif[ying] every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic" (Brown, 2015, p. 10). Discourse, in this sense, isn't purely a linguistic phenomenon; instead, it is *productive* and entangled with the material, such that Foucault (1972/2010) described discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49). These two aspects – neoliberalism as a subjectifying, governing discourse and as the application of economic logic to the social world – are helpful in understanding how neoliberalism is capable of mutating and co-opting progressive efforts at political change.

Neoliberalism's Responsibilized, Individual Subject

The discursive analysis that governmentality offers also explains how neoliberalism reshapes the *subject* in economic terms, giving rise to notions of "human capital" that demand investment and care for the sake of ongoing production, reifying capitalist notions of profit, production, and efficiency. Foucault (1979/2008) described this as a transition from a subject of exchange in classical liberalism – wherein individuals participate as barterers in economic transactions – to a "subject of interest" (p. 273) who makes choices to maximize their self-interests. Brown (2015) extended and complicated this analysis, situating neoliberalism in the current times and proffering as core to the modern neoliberal project the *responsibilized subject*, a "responsible self-investor and self-provider" who is "forced to engage in a particular form of self-sustenance that meshes with the morality of the state and health of the economy" (p. 84). Generally, Foucauldian conceptions of governmentality explain how "neo-liberal strategies of rule […] encourage people to see themselves as individualized and active

subjects responsible for enhancing their own wellbeing" (Larner, 2000, p. 13). In this way, neoliberal governmentality explains the set of decentralized relationships, discourses, and processes seemingly outside of but deeply entangled with the state apparatus that serve to control and participate in reassigning responsibility for wellbeing from the welfare state to the crafty, resilient individual subject.

Individual Choice and Cruel Attachments

Lemke (2001) and Brown (2015) related this strategy of neoliberal governance to Enlightenment-era notions of free will and rational actors. Enlightenment thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries (i.e., Hume, Locke, Descartes) crafted theories about what it means to be and to know, specifically rooting *being* in our capacity to *know* ("I think, therefore I am"), to rationalize, to individuate, to *choose*. The Enlightenment-era "subject of individual choices" (Foucault, 1979/2008, p. 272) which neoliberal rationality exploits becomes the site of responsibility for the outcomes of the choices they make. Relatedly, Lemke (2001) described neoliberalism's construction of

> *prudent subjects* whose moral quality is based on the fact that they rationally assess costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to other alternative acts. As the choice of options for action is, or so the neo-liberal notion of rationality would have it, the expression of free will on the basis of a self-determined decision, the consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them. (p. 201; emphasis added)

These theories of the rational humanist subject with free will, which "we've repeated […] again and again so it seems normal, natural, and real" (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 2), persist in our current times and constitute a sort of naturalized order, permeating the most ordinary

things. On the one hand, it's understandable how this could feel empowering and thus a difficult principle to abandon; if rationality rules, then we are each ostensibly *in control* of what happens to us. But on the other hand, in a world where the contours of our "rational choices" and "free will" are circumscribed by legacies of harm, systematic subjugation, and evasive promises that we can be anything we want to be as long as we work hard enough, "free will can become a heavy burden" (St. Pierre, 2011b, p. 43).

Neoliberal rationality masterfully fashions this burden as obligatory, if not desirable, such that the lure of "choice" becomes a cruel attachment, a muse into which we place our most dearly-held fantasies for the life we want, a choice to choose "choice." Berlant (2011) described "optimistic attachment[s]" as involving a "sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (p. 2), noting that such optimism becomes cruel when "the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place" (p. 25). In other words, "cruel optimism" is a paradoxical relation, one in which the object of our desire is, at the same time, a debilitating, precarity-inducing, or incapacitating force. This notion of cruel attachments is useful for thinking of "individual choice" as a neoliberal discursive construction. This discursive strategy succeeds in reassigning responsibility for wellbeing from the state to the individual (and thus creating widespread precarity in the face of governmental under-investment) while, at the same time, connecting this individual industriousness to the ultimate exercise of freedom and to a romanticized American nationalism. It elicits, too, an idealized vision of a future that, though always deferred,

hovers on the horizon as an imagined possibility. Only the "right" individual choices will help us approximate this mythic state, generating a sense of optimism that – because it is continually deferred – Berlant called "cruel."

To reference Berlant's (2011) quote, individual choice remains a powerful governing desire even as it "contributes to the attrition" (p. 25) of social wellbeing and comes at the expense of adequate economic and political investments to uproot precarity. Neoliberal strategies of governance are so inconspicuous precisely because responsibility for their maintenance and renewal *circulates across* seemingly discrete components of our social world. In this way, neoliberal strategies of governance occupy the delicate, paradoxical nexus of positioning the individual as the sole author of their plight while deputizing individuals to take up the economic and political interests of the state. As Tomlinson (2013) noted, "[n]eoliberalism works to reshape arguments about identity and structural power: rather than making the personal political, it makes the political personal" (p. 999). We might conceptualize this as a move that maintains proximity between the state and the individual for surveillance and control purposes while, at the same time, absolving the state from investing in the enabling conditions for universally thriving lives. To conceptualize the notion of "individual choice" that neoliberalism romanticizes as its own kind of cruel paradox, we might also more closely approximate avenues for disrupting the disorienting cycle of exercising minor freedoms in the narrow realm of possibility constructed by governing discourses and access other ways of doing and being entirely.

Burnout and Self-Care as Neoliberal Bedfellows

The thrust of my argument in this chapter is that neoliberal rationality has a conceptual and material hold in progressive community organizing as well. In this section, I argue that "burnout" and "self-care" are discursive deputies for neoliberalism, reinscribing an individualist ontology wherein the responsibilized subject is both the source of and solution to the harmful affects (i.e., exhaustion, overwork, resentment, frustration) "burnout" seeks to describe. I begin by revisiting the activist burnout literature, citing its prevalence in scholarly discussions about the health and sustainability of community organizing while deconstructing its conceptual underpinnings that rely on individualism. Then, I turn to self-care – a commonly proposed antidote to activist burnout – and individualized carework. I theorize how "care" has been individualized and co-opted by neoliberal rationality and explain that it is just one example of an assimilationist maneuver to fashion proximity between core "social justice" concepts and the state for the purposes of limiting and governing the transformative potential of community organizing. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I bring in comments from the organizer-collaborators I spoke with as part of this project to serve as additional theoretical and empirical substantiation for these claims.

Burnout and Individualism

Revisiting Activist Burnout. I return to the literature cited in chapter one and quote Chen and Gorski (2015) who argued that activist burnout results in "people once highly committed to a movement or cause or organization growing mentally exhausted and, as a result, losing the idealism and spirit that once drove them to work for social change" (p. 3). The activist burnout literature generally performs at least one of the

following: It tracks causes and symptoms of burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Gomes, 1992; Gorski, 2015; Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, & Rising, 2019) and/or, relatedly, examines activists' coping mechanisms and persistence strategies (Bunnage, 2014; Cox, 2011; Downton, Jr. & Wehr, 1998; Driscoll, 2020; Nah, 2021; Nepstad, 2004; Plyler, 2009; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). Causes of burnout as described in the literature include conflict with others in the organization or movement, feelings of overwork and underappreciation, deep awareness of and frustration with the scale of injustice, an organizational or movement culture that deprioritizes or shames wellbeing, and racist or sexist behavior from colleagues (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Rodgers, 2010).

The organizer-collaborators with whom I spoke as part of this project cited similar factors when asked to describe tensions or stuck places they've experienced in their organizing. In the following subsections, I aim to show that the forces organizers and activists often cite to describe tensions or challenging points in their organizing are *not* wholly individual – they touch relationships, time, race, gender, and work, all of which are intensely historical and contextualized entanglements. Yet, the primary available heuristic ("burnout") for describing and attempting to make sense of harmful or conflicting arrangements in community organizing settings have the individual as the primary referent. I explore how a neoliberal, individualist discourse capacitates and intensifies norms of urgency, challenges with capacity-building, and classed and racialized exclusions that threaten coalition-building. Ultimately, I attempt to show how the conflicts, tensions, and stuck places organizers experience in their work are not wholly individual, so "burnout" – with an individual as its referent (the person who is

burned out) – may not be the optimal conceptual formation that captures the complexity of struggles in organizing.

The Cruel Urgencies of Belonging. I spoke with one organizer, Carmen, who attributed tensions and stuck places in her organizing largely to a sense of urgency and a lack of mentorship that threatened feelings of belonging and contributed to her decision to disengage. Carmen considers herself relatively new to organizing and, during her senior year of college, she volunteered heavily in a coalitional effort to hold the local university accountable for its legacy of racism and history of relying on enslaved labor. We are close friends and have collaborated on organizing projects, and yet, before sitting down for an outdoor, distanced slice of pizza and beer, we hadn't talked at length about some of our shared perceptions of the challenges of organizing. Carmen spoke about the prevalence of conflict and the sense of urgency in the coalitional effort where she locates most of her organizing experience. The coalition was a loose network of newer organizers like Carmen and veteran organizer-elders, an intergenerational collaboration that isn't common in the city's progressive organizing settings. Its trajectory was driven mostly by young organizers, and Carmen reflected on how this shaped the culture of urgency:

> Especially in western culture or with young people […] there's this need for instant gratification. […] For most questions that we have, we can just look 'em up, and we're used to our needs being met rather quickly. So when I'm in a space of a bunch of young people who want instant results, there's just naturally going to be burnout.

This expectation to move quickly was exacerbated given the role of technology in the organizing; much of the planning occurred on social media and messaging platforms that, in some ways, function as another modality for governance at a distance (Rose, 1999). Online platforms are designed to be accessible from anywhere, anytime, and so can function as another surveilling mechanism by which to track production and efficiency.

The expectation to ceaselessly participate in the organizing and planning conversations created a dynamic wherein, as Carmen put it, "people [felt] like they don't have time to restore personal intimacies or personal relationships because they have to focus on the work." Carmen went on to reflect on how this expectation to be all-in for "the work" contributed, too, to a lack of a sense of belonging:

> I also didn't feel as accepted in [the] organizing space as I had hoped. I felt like there was a requirement to have a personality that meant that I move very quickly, I had to sacrifice my other interests, and I had to devote everything to this cause all day, every day. Need to be in the messages, need to reply, need to be available, and if I'm not, it's a testament to my commitment.

The sense of urgency that Carmen described is common in organizing communities; Gorski (2015), for example, connected it to a "culture of martyrdom" (p. 707) and Rodgers (2010) described a "ubiquitous discourse of selflessness" (p. 279) that produced similar pressures for continuous and fast-paced engagement and connected those expectations to perceptions about one's dedication to the work. Carmen's connections between the sacrificial expectation to "devote everything" and the pace at which this ongoing investment was expected to proceed suggest a neoliberalized discourse at work. Not only was Carmen expected to narrow the scope of her engagements, in large part, to

those ostensibly related to organizing, but this expectation also functioned as an efficiency-making tool. It was accelerationist, a mode of speeding up and increasing the production of a desired outcome.

Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism" is a useful analytic for thinking about how speed, desired futures, and one's perceived sense of belonging in organizing spaces can converge as neoliberalized reinforcements. Returning to Berlant (2011),

> optimism is cruel when it takes shape as an affectively stunning double bind: a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent. (p. 51)

In other words, optimism that is attached to an outcome or process that, paradoxically, inhibits access to its associated "cluster of promises" (Berlant, 2011, p. 23) is cruel in that it entices without ever fully and finally satisfying. Carmen spoke about how she "didn't feel as accepted" in the coalitional organizing and that she "didn't think that [she was] someone who had enough clout or respect or authority to have a good opinion," attributing these perceptions, in large part, to the urgency and total devotion that circulated as unspoken expectations. We might consider the pressure to participate in a particular way and to a particular extent in order to experience acceptance or belonging as a relation of cruel optimism. If only Carmen had chosen to be active in one more thread, or attended one more meeting, perhaps *then* she would have, once-and-for-all, gained the sense of trust and community that would have supported her comfort in sharing her ideas and opinions.

Montgomery and bergman (2017), relatedly, described how "radicalism becomes an *ideal*, and everyone is deficient in comparison" (p. 20). For them, rigid, idealized

radicalism can induce burnout and is an enactment of what they called *Empire*, or "the web of control that exploits and administers life – ranging from the most brutal forms of domination to the subtlest inculcation of anxiety and isolation" (p. 48). This idealization "imports Empire's tendencies of *fixing, governing, disciplining, and controlling*, while presenting these as a means of liberation or revolution" (pp. 173-4). This kind of romanticized relation, wherein the discourse in the organizing community is one in which one's dedication to "the work" or fitness as an organizer is attached to a specific, hyper-present, hyper-invested form of engagement, replicates a neoliberal logic that valorizes individual choice and productivity while contributing to the "attrition or the wearing out of the subject" (Berlant, 2011, p. 28).

The urgent and sacrificial expectations that Carmen connected to her sense of belonging underscore how an individualist ontological orientation that is attached to a sense of urgency to produce and participate in a purist, singular way can paradoxically manifest through suggestions to *get out of the way* (i.e., sideline other components of life not seemingly directly related to "the work") while simultaneously remaining hyper-present, hyper-invested in a singular type of engagement. Carmen's insights are so illuminating because they draw attention to how individualist, productivist discourses can create the conditions for unhealthy, unsustainable organizing that, ironically, threaten the very aims of "the work" in the first place. In other words, a looming expectation to prioritize the organizing work over the health of the *relationships* that make it possible can generate conflicts or feelings of organizer dissatisfaction that jeopardize the collective capacity to do "the work" at all.

"It is difficult to mentor someone else when you are so burned out": On the Challenges of Capacity-Building. Neoliberal discourse's governing individualism contributes not only to a state of social precarity that makes dedicating time to organizing (particularly for unpaid organizers) difficult but also to an individualist work ethic that can circulate in community organizing settings themselves. During our conversations, the organizer-collaborators and I talked at length about mentorship in community organizing, specifically in relation to questions about both conflicts or stuck places in our work and the relationships in organizing we need to thrive. In this section, I draw on the organizers' comments about the need for mentors before tracing the challenges of mentorship and capacity-building in largely volunteer-based organizing settings. Specifically, I suggest that the widespread social and economic precarity wrought by neoliberalism creates a context that materially and discursively positions organizers to replicate its logics by working individually to meet the urgency of the moment rather than investing in collective capacity-building or relational networks of support. This contributes to a cruel cycle wherein organizers personally take on additional labor to more quickly approximate a desired outcome which serves to further enhance their overwork and threaten capacity for future, more distributed and sustainable organizing.

Many of the organizers I spoke with reflected on the paucity of organizing and political mentors. Taylor's political work has spanned grassroots and electoral settings. He credits the Occupy Wall Street Movement with his growing involvement, and, since then, he has gone on to found a local progressive political organization and run for – and win! – local elected office. I consider Taylor one of my political mentors and a close friend. We've collaborated on a number of organizing projects, so hearing him talk so

candidly about his own views on mentorship was especially insightful. While he did name a handful of folks he considers mentors, he noted that "mentors are hard to come by" and sometimes when he did try "to build relationships with others, elders in the community" he was met with "disinterest." For Taylor, this contributed to a sort of improvisational ethos in his work. They were making mistakes, learning, and growing along the way: "There's not a school for this," Taylor said.

In our one-on-one conversation, Anna echoed Taylor's sentiment, also commenting that mentors "are hard to come by." Anna, a longtime local resident, joined the large community of people who became more politically engaged after Donald Trump was elected President in 2016. She grew increasingly passionate about electoral politics as a lever for progressive change and led the local Democratic Party's candidate development committee for two years. Anna talked about how she perceived the local political landscape as having been not long active, and so there was a dearth of mentors because it seemed like no one had really done the work before. For Anna, this called for a similar spirit of improvisation that Taylor invoked:

> So we really had to invent it, just like, picking up tidbits here and there from different people. And on one hand, that's kind of right, that's kind of empowering to feel like, "Okay, nobody seems to know what we should do, we're just gonna have to figure it out on our own." On the other hand, there's not much devoting to an effort like that, you know, when you're working on volunteers, like me, who will invest stuff and work hard on it *and then disappear and leave hardly a trace of what they've done*. (emphasis added)

In other words, Anna connected the scarcity of mentor and organizational support to an ambiguous process wherein it was both exciting to be able to *invent* an approach to candidate development and exhausting because of the immense amount of work that creation entails. So, for Anna, creating a sort of archive that could support future organizers (so they don't, too, have to start from scratch and then grow overworked) is an important strategy for long-term sustainability. She mentioned that she had wanted to create a candidate development handbook for future organizers to use, but this is one of the projects that fell through the cracks as compared to the other, more immediate demands of organizing like conducting electoral research and identifying and training Democratic candidates to run against Republicans in upcoming local and statewide elections.

Carmen, the labor and racial justice organizer I introduced in the previous section, described how mentor support might have helped mitigate the lack of acceptance and sense of urgency that permeated her organizing experience. When I asked about relationships she would need to nourish her organizing engagement, Carmen talked about the need for "more older Black people involved in the organizing" who share a similar radical politic who could serve as mentors to the younger Black organizers like herself. Carmen connected the guidance of mentors and elders to the sustainability of the work, drawing on her perceptions of organizing efforts in the nearby large, metropolitan city where she found progressive organizing communities that were more intergenerational. She noted that in these settings, older folks help set the tone by "sharing their experience and say[ing], 'this is the pace, this is what will work.'" For Carmen, relationships with

mentors and elders hold the promise for more healthy and sustainable practices in movement settings.

In the roundtable discussions, we also talked about how difficult it can be to mentor someone else when there are so many other demands on time. Taylor, the grassroots organizer who's now an elected official, spoke about the immense amount of work it can take to mentor and delegate. He mentioned how in his work with the social and economic justice organization he co-founded (prior to winning his election as a local legislator), the work relied on volunteers so he collaborated with "whoever walked in the god damn door." He felt like he had to display an almost excessive enthusiasm in an attempt to retain people. He disclosed the challenges of relying on volunteerism, noting that he often took on additional work himself because "it's hard to find people." He described his thought process as: "I know I can do it [the task/project], and I'm just gonna do it. That way I don't have to worry about it." In many ways, this is analogous to Taylor's challenges in getting the support he needs in his current role as a local elected official, a position that does not come with staff. He similarly has had to personally arrange a process to bring on an intern to support his government work. He spoke specifically about the challenges of mentoring an intern:

> It takes so much work and so much structure for me to do that. I really found myself feeling like I either had to choose to […] get something productive done, like get it done, as I knew it needed to be done, or […] teach somebody through this and maybe not get it done and maybe have to do it myself anyways at the end, and really just not having […] time or ability to do both things.

For Taylor, taking the time to mentor or educate someone else, while important, can mean risking the careful completion of the task or foregoing some of the more immediate projects that beckon.

Lydia also spoke about the difficulty of getting volunteer support, which contributed to her personal overwork. Lydia is a local artist who coordinated volunteers, designed graphics, strategized legislative action, and contributed to myriad other efforts in a volunteer-run, grassroots social and economic justice advocacy organization. Lydia spoke about how hard it was to get volunteers to sign up for specific tasks:

> I spent a lot of time trying to get people to fill roles that […] needed to be filled, and that almost never worked. It almost never worked to like, have a role then try to reach out to people to fill it. […] People would show up and kinda do what they wanted to do.

Lydia shared how this labor-intensive effort to find and train volunteers for pre-existing tasks or projects sometimes just wasn't worth it:

> It seemed like delegating took more work than just doing the thing myself. […] So a lot of the time I was doing the stuff that I shoulda been getting volunteers to do the stuff for me because I couldn't get a volunteer to do it or it was too much trouble to get somebody else.

In other words, Lydia struggled to find the volunteer support she needed and so was cast into a position of laboring individually.

Anna contextualized a similar concern, noting how her role as candidate development chair was unpaid. As a volunteer organizer, she felt especially frustrated and resentful about the lack of support from others:

> So recruiting volunteers is tough, and hanging on to volunteers, and finding people who will actually do what they say is tough because people are not getting paid for this usually. It made me kind of resentful in a leadership role, of, "So why does it have to be *me* doing all of this work? I'm not getting paid anything. Why am I kind of left high and dry and people come through and they're not stepping up to really help and do the work?"

Anna wasn't compensated to lead the candidate development committee for the local Democratic Party even though she invested nearly 20 hours a week in the role. This problem contributed to her resentment and uncertainty about whether other people actually cared about the work, despite what they may have said. Here, neoliberalism enables conditions in which social action and civic engagement are so socially devalued that political organizing is typically unpaid work. The difficulty of finding *volunteer labor* for progressive change efforts in a neoliberalized social world that incentivizes personal economic growth and self-sufficiency over collectivism – in a context where wages remain stagnant – is not entirely surprising. Neoliberal discourse also impacts participation in civic life. Participation in civic institutions is declining (Denton & Voth, 2016) alongside Americans' trust of government and of one another (Rainie & Perrin, 2019). This tendency toward individualism, aided by neoliberal discourses, increases fragmentation and diminishes trust in collective processes and notions of the collective good.

The neoliberal trend of divestment in social change organizations such that organizers don't have the infrastructural support or capacity they need to transition to the next project can create scenarios where they truly get *stuck* in a role they didn't

necessarily want in the first place or no longer wish to be in. Anna, the candidate development organizer, emphasized how a lack of people to do the work contributed to why she took on a leadership role in the first place. Anna described being "thrust into" her role leading candidate development efforts for the local chapter of the Democratic Party: "I didn't really want to be the person in charge but it just seemed like there was nobody else […] stepping forward to do it." V described a similar sentiment. V is a long-time organizer and elected official who describes her advocacy as "organic." She participated in local educational advocacy efforts in the 1980s aimed at electing more Black school board members and has since worked in/with a variety of labor and economic justice organizations in addition to serving on the school board and as a local legislator. She spoke about how difficult it was to step back from a particular project despite feeling like it was the time:

> The only reason why I think I've drug it out this long, […] longer than it should be is because one lady had convinced me that I needed to […] stay involved. And then another gentleman, […] he was like, "What are we gonna do when you leave?"

Both Anna and V expressed an attachment to this notion that no one else can or will step up, which made it difficult for each of them to contribute in a sustainable and desirable way. The sense of overwhelm, as if the whole project might just crumble if one person leaves, is familiar to me, as well. I stayed in my role as coordinator of the social and economic justice organization months longer than I otherwise would have because I feared no one would replace me and the organization I cared about would collapse. However, had there been a sustained and coordinated effort to archive and communicate

institutional knowledge while also building up future leaders, I imagine I would have felt more confident stepping back.

Harriett had a similar take, attributing the difficulty of mentoring to what she described as "burnout" and the demoralizing exhaustion that can come from years of the kind of political advocacy many people – particularly political conservatives – are antagonistic toward. Harriett is the director of a local nonprofit organization that focuses on civic engagement and economic justice. She spoke of her many years leading voter engagement efforts and how immovable, resistant, and even sometimes downright insulting people could be:

> And so I think after […] sixteen years of those "no's", you don't let it affect you, but at some point it does affect you. That interferes with your ability to try to mentor someone. You don't have any energy to mentor anyone. Like right now I got some young folks working with me but I'm pretty much hopin' that – I'm trying to give them stuff to read and that kinda stuff because I kinda just can't go through it again. I said I was gonna write a book but I didn't. […] Maybe I might still do it but I feel like it's late. […] So, I just don't have the energy to go through those experiences again and try to explain it to someone again. You just get tired of asking, tired of talkin' about it, and it just gets to be, you know, too much after a while. […] And you know you need to get someone to take your place because, you know, it needs to go on, but after a while you just saying, "well they'll get it, the world will go on with or without what I know." […] It is difficult to mentor someone else when you are so burned out.

As director of a nonprofit, Harriett does receive a salary for her work and yet the scope of the injustices she's advocating against – low wages, poor working conditions, voter suppression, lack of community engagement, and more – coupled with the demoralizing impacts of all the "no's" over the years, has contributed to what Harriett described as "burnout." She touched on how the lack of energy to mentor, in turn, reinforces a sense of isolation, creating a frustrating loop. She offered a marching band as a metaphor for this experience: "And you are just marching and you are so proud of what you're doing and you're just marching, marching, marching, and then you decide to look back, and you notice that your band has all sit down on the sidewalks and you're out there just marching by yourself." The years of exhaustion and overwork have led Harriett to struggle with building the kind of organizational capacity that could revitalize and collectivize the work and facilitate her retirement from her directorship. In turn, Harriett has put the book she wants to write – which could facilitate the work of younger generations and contribute to intergenerational collaboration – on the backburner to address seemingly more immediate needs.

The comments of these organizers offer a glimpse at how organizing and building collective power in the context of neoliberalism is difficult, especially given neoliberalism's historical antagonism toward social movements. Hong (2015a) described how neoliberalism took hold in the wake of the 1960s liberation movements as a "brutal crackdown by the forces of the state as well as the incorporation and affirmation of those aspects of these movements that were appropriable" (p. 11). Anti-colonial movements, racial justice movements, and anti-capitalist movements – especially their components that can't be folded into and watered down by the apparatuses of the state – pose a direct

threat to neoliberalism's precarity-inducing logic of individualism and privatization. Butler (2015) described precarity as "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (p. 33). The precarity wrought by neoliberalism creates a context that then materially and discursively positions organizers to replicate its logics by working individually to meet the urgency of the moment rather than investing in collective capacity-building or relational networks of support. Anna didn't make the candidate development handbook she had planned before she left her candidate development role and Harriett hasn't written her book. Taylor put it perfectly:

> This work is so ambiguous and is not meaningfully valued by most of society, which is capitalistically run. And because of that, there hasn't been a lot of work and studies and experiences that can be shared or books written […] about […] that work. […] There's not nearly enough passed-on wisdom or work or experiences [for] the new organizers so that we could be becoming generationally better run machines – machines might be a bad word, maybe not, it's fine.

Ultimately, the paucity of mentorship support that some of the organizers expressed and the challenges of mentoring and capacity-building that others discussed reflect a paradoxical relation: On the one hand, newer organizers want mentors to help set the pace, bring in resources and wisdom, and provide guidance. On the other hand, taking the time to recruit and educate volunteer laborers or to archive prior efforts – particularly in a precarity-inducing economy where overwork and underpay is the norm – creates additional labor that doesn't necessarily have an immediate "payoff." In this way,

neoliberal conditions and the related search for more immediate returns produce scenarios in organizing spaces where organizers are discursively positioned as deputies for neoliberal logic. Specifically, they are positioned as "*responsibilized individuals* […] required to provide for themselves in the context of powers and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so" (Brown, 2015, p. 134; emphasis added). In the excerpts shared above, organizers were driven to labor individually because the work of building capacity was just too difficult in a context where there's just *so much that needs to be done* and finding volunteer labor or providing mentor support would supplant another, seemingly more pressing need. The assumption circulating here is that the work of building capacity is somehow ancillary or secondary to the issue-based needs or campaigns that are directed to addressing major political problems. The notion that it is possible (and urgent!) to do and sustain "the work" individually without this broader network of support is part of a neoliberal discourse of individualism circulating in organizing settings. In summary, neoliberalism is operating in two particular ways here: (1) in inducing and maintaining widespread economic precarity and perpetuating a logic of ongoing, individual self-improvement that makes widespread participation in civic life and social change organizing especially difficult; and (2) by discursively and materially positioning community organizers as, paradoxically, individually responsible for their organizing labors.

Individualism's Constitutive Exclusions. As I explain in chapter five, the individualism that neoliberalism promotes is supported by a particular Cartesian ontology that enables a host of constructed binaries. The notion of the discrete, unitary individual capacitates oppressive and exclusionary hierarchies across multiple lines of difference.

Andres, an immigrant rights organizer, spoke about the exclusions he faced that threatened the possibility of building sustainable coalition with differently situated organizers. Andres founded a local immigrant rights advocacy organization in the southeastern United States committed to dignity and liberation for all undocumented people which engages in policy advocacy and hosts an annual festival to elevate and celebrate Latinx culture. His political work began in Mexico where he was primarily organizing "through culture," performing folk music on the neighborhood streets as part of a theater troupe before moving to the United States where he continued to perform Latin American music in schools. In the United States, he connected with nonprofit organizations in the town where he lives and became involved in a few issue-based campaigns for economic justice and im/migrant rights. He described the racialized devaluation he faced when collaborating with university professors on an effort to create an educational program for undocumented youth:

> One of my biggest issues with organizing is that automatically […] people value the voice of the scholars, […] people who has a degree, and they immediately diminish my opinion and my work. […] People use the legality […] to justify the reasons why they don't hire me, why they don't value my work with money, why they don't pay me a salary. Still though […] in the really back of their brains it's because they racist. It's because I'm undocumented and, and also I'm uneducated, no?

Ultimately, the university professors with whom Andres was collaborating were perpetuating classist, racist, and neoliberal discourses that value (theoretically and materially) a particular type of knowledge production that is attached to academic

credentials as "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1980/1990, p. 112). Institutions of higher education like the one where the university professors Andres mentioned worked have long been "knowledge gatekeepers" who validate or reject what counts as knowledge. Dotson (2014) called this work "epistemic oppression": "persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production" (p. 115). Despite his many contributions to the initial idea development and base-building, Andres was constructed as somehow *outside of* or *ancillary to* the knowledge-making process.

Though Andres' story may not reflect a *persistent* exclusion of this kind, it's clear that he felt excluded from a leadership opportunity in organizing because he didn't fit a particular image of the highly-educated American citizen. Despite his central role in the genesis of the project to create an educational program for undocumented youth, Andres was essentially cut out as it gained traction:

> They left me behind the picture. And when they were interview or when they create the webpage, they were saying that […] four professors of [the university] initiate [the school for undocumented youth], which was not true because was initiative of the community and community organizers.

Here, another form of exclusion is at work which aligns with the neoliberal applications of economic logic to social life. Bourdieu (1980/1990) wrote that "the conversion of economic capital into symbolic capital […] produces relations of dependence that have an economic basis but are disguised under a veil of moral relations" (p. 123). In other words, noneconomic realms of life are recast as economic concerns such that one's formal education level, class, nationality, and so on become sinister signifiers for one's value. Despite Andres' own accounts of all the ways he contributed to and built support

for the initial idea of creating an educational program for undocumented youth, he was rendered illegible, thrust into the "limits of recognizability" (Butler, 2015, p. 40) as the project went public. The value of the project was attributed to those who met a very specific definition of the human: documented, class-privileged, and highly-educated. For Andres, these tensions were frustrating and disappointing, but never totally immobilizing: "Sometimes it make me to say, 'fuck you, I don't wanna work with you anymore' […] but it never prevent me to keep going."

Messy Entanglements. It's clear that the forces organizers and activists often cite to describe tensions or challenges in their organizing are *not* wholly individual – they touch relationships, time, race, work, and more – all of which are intensely historical and contextualized entanglements. Yet the primary available heuristic ("burnout") for describing and attempting to make sense of harmful or conflicting arrangements in community organizing settings use the individual as the primary referent. The person experiencing the harm, the exhaustion, the conflict, the tension, is the subject of burnout. They are the *burned out subject*, the holder of traces of harm from an array of forces across time and space. In this way, burnout works in the service of neoliberal discourse by initiating an ontological closure, positioning the individual as the affected party and thus reinstating the individual as the site of responsibility for enacting a change to cope or to rectify the harm done.

Burnout as a concept also inserts stasis and permanence since to be burned out suggests a finality, a sort of irreparable decay. Yet, the organizer-collaborators I spoke with had a different story to tell about navigating tensions in organizing that challenge the

teleological narrative that "burnout" implies. Anna spoke about the impossibility of becoming apolitical despite stepping back from particular engagements:

> So, despite the fact that I really did kind of burn out and drop out of being so heavily engaged, I was never like, "Oh, I'm not gonna think about politics anymore." You know…I can't not think about it. [*laughter*]

Lydia also emphasized the ambiguity of her organizing encounters, citing both joy and exhaustion: "It was my whole life for a solid year. And in a really positive way in addition to being exhausting, you know, it was […] a tremendously vibrant feeling community." V, too, noted how her engagement in organizing is emergent and never final. She said:

> This transition is still progressing, if that makes sense. You know, it's not like after I've done whatever I did, you know, you get a blank screen. Everyone, people are watching you and you don't even know it. […] Those are the things that make me happy.

V spoke at length about the notion of legacy, reflecting on what we leave behind and whose path we helped shape as organizers. She talked passionately about the importance of not "forget[ting] folk that have kinda laid that path for you" and of always "trying to bring somebody up with you" on your organizing journey. In this way, V conceptualized her organizing as an always already historical, intergenerational, collective effort that reaches beyond individuals.

It's grassroots stories like these that affirm scholarly challenges to the neat and tidy fictions of linearity and the atomized, individual subject, both of which neoliberal discourse so effectively weaponizes in an attempt to quell collective mobilization,

absolve the state/institution from responsibility for wellbeing, and furnish capital. By centering the individualized subject as the recipient of burnout's related affects, "burnout" as a concept places the burden on the individual to craft an antidote while, at the same time, obscuring the material-discursive context that informs the forces outlined above that organizers described as contributing to the tensions or stuck places in their work. That antidote commonly manifests in calls for self-care or appeals to individualized carework as substantive mechanisms by which to address problems whose complexity exceeds the individual.

Neoliberal Co-optation of Care

The literature on activist burnout is ripe with examples of burnout prevention strategies that elevate self-care (Cox, 2011; Driscoll, 2020; Fox-Hodess, 2015; Gorski, 2015; Obear, 2018). More recently, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 uprisings against racial injustice, popular media outlets and social media influencers increasingly tout the benefits of self-care for those engaging in social justice activism (Dumais, 2020; Hui, 2020; Leal, 2020; McNamara, 2020; Yates, 2020). Specific strategies include engaging in mindfulness activities, resting, exercising, getting outdoors, and making time for play. While these measures can be immensely useful for mitigating immediate harms and important in collaboration with a broader range of sociopolitical supports, self-care on its own risks concealing how community organizing settings can and do reproduce oppressive norms that do not have entirely individual solutions.

Like burnout, "self-care" is a ready candidate for co-optation by neoliberalism because, discursively, it centers the individual as responsible for coping with the stresses

of norms, pressures, and harms produced in the context of multiple relations of subjugation. However, feminists like Lorde (1988/2017) who famously called self-care "an act of political warfare" (p. 130) and Ahmed (2014), who noted that "self-care is about the creation of community […] assembled out of the experiences of being shattered," formulated self-care not as an individual act of self-indulgence, but rather a politicized modality of community survival and refusal in a world intent on reproducing the fungibility of communities marginalized by white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. I agree with Michaeli (2017) that this radical feminist conceptualization of self-care is promising and important, and quite distinct from the "neoliberal version of 'self-care' embraced by the mainstream society" (p. 52). Neoliberalism has co-opted the language of self-care and fashioned it into yet another tool for remaking "social responsibility" for wellbeing as "a matter of personal provisions" (Lemke, 2001, p. 201) which, in turn, aids the suppression of progressive organizing and the accumulation of capital through the self-care industrial complex. In what follows, I begin by drawing on conversations with organizers to show how conflict mediation in organizing spaces can be shaped as individualized carework. Then, I turn to how the neoliberal suppression of progressive organizing and the self-care industrial complex operate as techniques of neoliberal governance that threaten "self-care" as a suitable preventative measure or antidote for affects attributed to "burnout" in community organizing.

Conflict Mediation as Individualized Carework. An inattention to the quality of the relations that capacitate organizing in the name of urgency and self-sacrifice that Carmen described earlier in this chapter is dangerous because often the additional labor that "self-sacrifice" creates tends to fall on women and People of Color. An individualist

ethic wherein relational needs and issues are the responsibility not of the institution, structure, or organization but the individual or mini-collective can perpetuate scenarios like the one Lydia described below where, when a systematic process or protocol for addressing conflict in an organization is lacking, the emotional labor falls on women to intervene when relational tensions inevitably arise. Lydia – the artist whose organizing spanned a variety of volunteer coordination and other projects as part of a volunteer-run, grassroots social and economic justice organization – described the emotional labor she regularly performed in an attempt to mediate other people's conflict:

> Just like, hundreds of hours stocked into reading through Facebook posts and replying to things and then going into private messaging and being like, "Are you okay?" You know, "You seem pretty upset." So just a lot of soothing ruffled feathers or trying to figure out where people stood on certain issues or trying to do conflict mediation.

Lydia went on to describe the ambiguity of this labor, noting how on the one hand, "the deliberate dissolution of boundaries" she found herself enacting and the associated emotional labor strengthened trust:

> Where the work ended and just like interpersonal communication started was very unclear. So sometimes it felt like part of the work was just gossiping with people, you know? Or just being friendly and reaching out and kinda just talking some mild shit or, you know, being like, "What'd you think about this?" or whatever, and then you make those bonds and they strengthen. And you reassure one another that you trust one another and like one another.

While Lydia acknowledged how this "deliberate dissolution of boundaries" had some benefits for trust-building and conflict mediation, she also recognized the large amount of time and energy it consumed. She noted:

> But at a certain point, you have the bad stuff, good stuff, and are having a constant tug of war, and meanwhile, you know, you've dicked over like all your clients [*laughter*] and your career is suffering, and your friends who are not activism-related are like, "Why don't you call us anymore?" And your house is a wreck and, you know, you've only been eating pasta for weeks or whatever.

Lydia's comments demonstrate how emotional labor came to be a part of what she saw as her work as an organizer and, in turn, contributed to her overwork that jeopardized other things she cared about. Earlier in our conversation, Lydia noted that she was never really clear what her specific role as volunteer coordinator was supposed to entail. By stepping in to provide mediation work for which there was no organizational or institutional structure, Lydia assumed the role of caretaker that is so often assigned to women.

Jasmine also told me about a time when she was cast into a nurturing, laboring role after a conflict with a colleague which she ultimately refused. Jasmine is a local elected official in her first term in office. She grew up in the same town and considers herself quite new to political organizing. Prior to running her own campaign, she had worked on a friend's local campaign, and she described that process as one where they were "building the plane as [they] were flying it," echoing the sentiments that both Anna and Taylor expressed, as well, about an organizing context that demands improvisation. When I asked about a conflict or stuck place in her political work, she described a "cultural misunderstanding" with an older white male colleague that resulted in a request

for her, a Black woman, to provide resources for this colleague even though she was the person to whom his racist comments were directed. While she initially agreed, she soon realized:

> It's not my job. I'm not the board psychologist. You know? And so I had to circle back around and say, "Yeah […] I know I said this, but I'm not going to do that. That burden is too great. You know? [...] There are a lot of wonderful resources out that exist that I think you're [the white male colleague] more than experienced and capable of finding.

Jasmine's example highlights, in part, the gendered *and* racialized implications of neoliberal rationality that responsibilizes the individual over the institution. Jasmine's assertion that "it's not [her] job" raises important questions, too, about what jobs and roles *do* get formally assigned as part of the institutional or social fabric and which occupy a more nebulous, ambiguous domain awaiting eager (volunteer) workers. I view this assignment of a social/institutional problem (racism) to individuals to rectify as a technique of neoliberal governance. While grassroots mutual aid, de-escalation, and harm prevention work that is designed to be a safe and just alternative to the carceral state are certainly important and necessary enactments of community care, particularly for precarious populations (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020), the power relations in Jasmine's example warrant attention. The white man was expected to engage in a self-improvement process *outside of* the institution itself; and Jasmine, the Black woman who had to carry the weight of his racism, was expected to facilitate that process. Had power been arranged differently here, or had there been a foundation of trust and a culture of mutual support, perhaps a request to support a colleague's learning wouldn't be so

troubling. However, the racialized and gendered contours of the scenario Jasmine described make this request for unpaid carework part of a governing situation in which "the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself" (Foucault as cited in Lemke, 2001, pp. 203-4). In other words, in this case, racism was recast as an individual, interpersonal problem whose solution lies not principally in structural or institutional processes, but in individuals' willingness to improve themselves through personal learning, which, in turn, positions other individuals as their educators and guides.

Foucault's (1982) theorizing about how governance is connected to relations of power – specifically that "[t]he exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct" (p. 221) – is useful for thinking about how neoliberal governance can serve as a modality for producing and reinscribing relations of domination. Brown (2015) extended this analysis, aptly describing how neoliberalism intensifies longstanding relations of subjugation, arguing specifically in relation to gender that the "shrinking, privatization, and/or dismantling of public infrastructure supporting families, children, and retirees" that is part and parcel of neoliberalism results in carework being "returned to individuals, disproportionately to women" (p. 105). While the governing board on which Jasmine sits does constitute the domain of the "public" that Brown (2015) referenced, community organizing settings are not necessarily part of the "public." Nonetheless, the same neoliberalized discourse of responsibilization can circulate in community organizing settings and produce an arrangement where care infrastructure is deprioritized. And so, in keeping with longstanding patriarchal norms, the "provision and responsibility" for

carework and emotional labor "get[s] theoretically and ideologically tucked into what are assumed as preferences issuing naturally from sexual difference" (Brown, 2015, p. 105).

Lydia and Jasmine's testimonies contribute to an understanding of the failure of some community organizing and local government arrangements to have clear and coordinated support mechanisms for addressing conflict. As such, when interpersonal conflicts permeate the organizing space, the labor can fall on an individual – often, and in this case, some women and People of Color – to be expected to or to feel compelled to take up the labor to intervene.

Carewashing. Organizers' comments described above illustrate how care can operate as an individual responsibility in community organizing settings with racialized and gendered implications. In Lydia's case, the ambiguity of her role in the organization created a situation in which she spent a lot of time doing what she thought needed to be done. Because there was no defined role or process for conflict mediation, she took up this caring position and spent much of her time mediating other people's conflicts or providing emotional support on- and off-line. In Jasmine's example, I believe care operated in much the same way; Jasmine was discursively cast as a "carer" and "educator" when she was asked to guide a white male colleague through learning about racism – a request which Jasmine ultimately refused.

Self-care operates as another mode of individualized care and has been readily co-opted by profit-making sectors. As a governing rationality, neoliberalism latches on to existing concepts and trends and repurposes them for market-based, economic ends. So, when "care" is rearticulated as an individual responsibility – as in Lydia and Jasmine's stories above – a new set of commoditized resources becomes available that are

positioned to take the place of social supports or what The Care Collective (2020) called "care commons and infrastructures" (p. 77). In the case of "self-care," the individual is not necessarily to bear the responsibility of caring for others in the face of a lack of care infrastructure, but, more specifically, of investing in and supporting oneself in a precarious context that continually contributes to the "wearing out of the subject" (Berlant, 2011, p. 28).

The Care Collective (2020) coined the term "carewashing" to describe how corporations have taken up "care" discourse in an effort to "increase their legitimacy by presenting themselves as socially responsible 'citizens', while really contributing to inequality and ecological destruction" (p. 26). Starbucks, for example, has run social media ads featuring a woman lying on a lawn chair drinking a Frappuccino with the tagline, "It's called self care" (Figure 1).

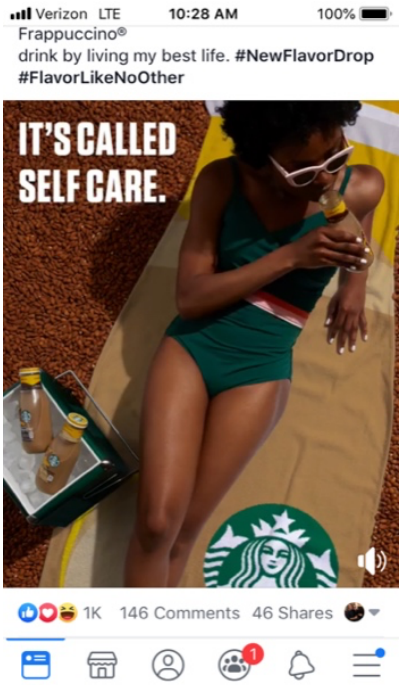

Figure 1: Starbucks self-care Facebook ad, July 2019

Newspapers publish articles with headlines like, “16 popular self-care products under $30” (Bahoosh, 2020) and “15 self-care gifts you can buy yourself on Amazon” (Polk & Felton, 2018). Self-care is deeply entwined with American consumerism. I’m not suggesting that spending money on ourselves is inherently morally wrong. In a society that has strong capitalistic elements like the U.S., it would be naïve to expect a totalizing refutation of capitalism’s lures. What is concerning about this neoliberal co-optation is the sinister way that corporations – who contribute *en masse* to climate disaster, poverty, and other social ills, and who are always beholden first to their shareholders and their profit motive – manufacture a proximity between a radical feminist concept like self-care and corporate capitalism.

This attempt to fashion an intimacy between care and the market can be considered part of what Ahmed (2010) described as “the happiness turn” wherein “happiness is used to redescribe social norms as social goods" (p. 2). She conceptualized how happiness is constructed as an “individual responsibility” that involves “mak[ing] ourselves happy, as an acquisition of capital that allows us to be or to do this or that, or even to get this or that” (p. 10). To return to Berlant (2011), self-care as it’s constructed and marketed in mainstream society functions as a *cruel attachment* wherein the wellness and thriving that “self-care” promises is attached, at the same time, to the very capitalist commoditization that produces widespread precarity and contributes to the desperate search for self-care salves in the first place. This “market mediated and commoditised care” (The Care Collective, 2020, p. 23) functions as a lure, positioning solutions to stress and suffering not in sociopolitical mobilization but rather in the crafty, resourceful consumer. At the same time, it produces a never-ending capitalist, “cruel optimist”

(Berlant, 2011) scenario where "care" for the self is consumed (the Frappuccino is gone, the massage ends, etc.) and therefore the person seeking the care must work more to earn more money to finally get the care they perceive they need. It is an unending loop between the necessity of work and the temporary relief from the erosive effects of labor afforded by the object(s) that get alchemized with caring properties.

Quelling progressive organizing. Montgomery and bergman (2017) characterized the transmutation of economic logic into social life that neoliberalism commits as an effect of "Empire," or, "the web of control that exploits and administers life" with the aim of "bring[ing] us all into the same world, with one morality, one history, and one direction, and to convert differences into hierarchical, violent divisions" (p. 48). Neoliberal discourse is complicit in this flattening gesture, saturating economic logic so thoroughly across otherwise noneconomic realms such that, for example, "one might approach one's dating life in the mode of an entrepreneur or investor" (Brown, 2015, p. 31). Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) might have characterized Empire as a process of territorializing, "a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation" that imposes "forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendencies" (p. 159). Conceptualizing neoliberalism as an enactment of Empire, or the process of limiting the scope of allowable difference, offers an entryway into thinking about how neoliberalism operates as a tool for muting dissent by feigning the embrace of progressive concepts (including "care") while disarticulating them from their legacy and deradicalizing their message.

Earlier in this chapter, I elaborated the challenges of building sustainable mentorship relations in organizing that are due, in part, to the precarity neoliberalism

induces that threatens collective mobilization and to its discursive construction of the individual as the most reliable source to address immediate needs or problems, a logic which can seep into organizing spaces. The parasitic connection between neoliberalism and progressive organizing is an especially relevant nexus that sheds light on neoliberal rationality's investment in quelling progressive organizing and the associated challenges this can pose to organizing settings themselves.

Ferguson and Hong (2012) extended Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism as governmentality, describing neoliberalism as a regulatory technology that engages in the "containment of the crisis generated by liberation movements through the incorporation of as formerly contestatory politics into state discourses" (p. 1061). In positioning neoliberalism in relation to mid-20th century liberatory social movements, they explained how the co-optation of social justice discourse (i.e., inclusion, multiculturalism) was a neoliberal strategy aimed at folding potential dissidents, deviants, and revolutionaries into status quo capitalist power. Using the 1965 Moynihan Report to showcase the racialized and gendered contours of this neoliberal assimilation, Hong (2015b) argued that "a crucial element of incorporating Black communities in the United States into biopower was to constitute them as populations requiring help and care (by narrating them as presently deviant)" (p. 57). Hong demonstrated how the Moynihan Report served as one modality for neoliberal power by constructing Black fathers as absent and Black mothers as sexually deviant and proposing a national investment in the nuclear, patriarchal family. This investment, in taking the form of what Hong (2015b) called an "invitation into respectability" (p. 59), enabled the "more efficient extraction of a variety of forms of surplus from populations rendered marginal and deviant" (p. 59). Put another way,

neoliberal discourse performs a hailing maneuver, folding marginalized communities into the domain of respectability masquerading as care, thus establishing a sort of latching-on point that facilitates their surveillance, control, and subjugation.

The distortion of concepts with roots in progressive politics is a well-worn neoliberal "technique of governance" (Ahmed, 2014). Ahmed (2017) traced how social justice discourse is co-opted and mutated by state-sponsored diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, describing how the existence of the DEI office or initiative, for example, is itself meant to serve as an adequate solution to the myriad problems that create the context for calls for DEI in the first place. James (2013), too, troubled the neoliberal exploitation of social justice discourse, coining the term "neoradicalism" to denote so-called progressive/radical paradigms that serve neoliberal capitalist ends. To illustrate this point, James (2013) critiqued state-based feminist and antiracist initiatives, noting how they represent a "managerial ethos" (p. 59) that attempts to sterilize the power of transformative and/or abolitionist efforts by folding their key terms into the regulatory apparatus. Feminism is another convincing example of a social change effort that has been co-opted to produce a neoliberal brand of feminism (Fraser, 2009; Rottenberg, 2014). Referencing Sheryl Sandberg's 2014 book, *Lean In*, Rottenberg (2014) showed how a neoliberal form of feminism has emerged that uses "key liberal terms, such as equality, opportunity, and free choice, while displacing and replacing their content" (pp. 421-2) to reflect the entrepreneurial, individualistic logic of neoliberal rationality.

This neoliberal co-optation or assimilation can happen, too, in the form of progressive non-profit organizations that can become modalities for the work of the

corporatized carceral state (Meiners, 2013; Rodriguez, 2017/2007). Rodriguez (2017/2007) traced how corporate funders latch on to non-profit organizations, bolstering the non-profit industrial complex which serves as a "disciplinary or repressive force on contemporary social movement organizations while nurturing a particular ideological and structural *allegiance* to state authority that preempts political radicalisms" (p. 29). Through putting forth massive amounts of money in the form of grants for very particular types of tame and acceptable projects, what James (2013) called the "corporate Left" (p. 58) incentivizes social change efforts to "institutionalize their political formations" and establish an organizational model that "reflects the style of chief executives and mirrors state corporate sites" (James, 2013, p. 58), initiating a proximity between community-based social change work and the corporate world.

One of the immigrant rights organizers I spoke with, Andres, told me about the tactical shifts in his organizing over the years in both Mexico and the United States and compellingly commented about his transition from a non-profit model of organizing to a grassroots model. He spoke about how in the early days of his involvement in political, issue-based work in the United States, the tools and strategies he was exposed to and came to replicate "were a copy from the 501(c)(3)s." Specifically, he named his initial focus on facilitating "know your rights" workshops and equipping local undocumented communities with the tools to "resist deportations." This common progressive, non-profit model that is focused on resistance and on rights-based reforms (which necessitate an appeal to and so reinscribe the legitimacy of the state) is a key fixture of the non-profit industrial complex. The "dependent relation […] with the neoliberal state and philanthropic foundations" (Rodriguez, 2017/2007, p. 33) that non-profits are hailed into

is characterized by a sort of reactionary, reformist approach to social change. To be clear, there certainly is an overwhelming degree of suffering and precarity that requires direct service provision and crisis response. The problem, though, lies in the fact that the nonprofit sector nationally – and in the town where the organizers I spoke with live – is *overwhelmingly* in the work of direct-service provision rather than grassroots abolitionist or transformative systemic change that have the capacity to "transform the conditions that make injustice possible" (brown, 2017, p. 126).

While there are certainly concrete, material incentives for non-profits to do the kind of work aimed at making up for the socially-induced precarities of American life (as opposed to grassroots work that would be characterized as abolitionist or transformational), Rodriguez (2010) noted how the nonprofit industrial complex, through its entanglement with corporate state power, also engages in the "*disciplining of the political imagination*" (p. 16) that constrains conceptualizations of what desirable and viable social change looks like. This is a disciplinary technique of neoliberal governance that – by rewarding incremental efforts to resist the latest onslaught of bad policy, or to fill the gaps in service provision created and maintained by neoliberalism – protects against more disruptive efforts at abolition and transformation. Drawing from Nikolas Rose, Meiners (2013) cautioned that the strength of neoliberal capitalism lies in its distribution *across* decentralized "networks of power" (p. 274) that facilitate government from a distance. In other words, nonprofit and social change organizations can and do become sites for the maintenance, growth, and circulation of neoliberal discourse.

Andres noted that his initial approach to organizing was "very reactive" because this was the approach of the organizing communities he was engaged with at the time but

also, in part, because "migrant life […] is a state of emergency" and it was the tools of 501(c)(3) nonprofits that were available and directed toward reacting to the latest crisis. Yet it was also the large 501(c)(3)s, observed Andres, that were "using the pain of immigrants to fundraise money." His approach to organizing soon shifted, compelled by connections with a relatively new national, grassroots movement for immigrant justice that prioritized base-building and policy change. For Andres, this transition was an important one that shifted the course of his work from a rights-based approach to what he calls "the work of liberation," a move which, too, signaled a disentangling from the disciplinary apparatus of the nonprofit industrial complex.

Neoliberal rearticulations like those described above are so dangerous because, by co-opting the language (and even social change efforts themselves) originally designed to give meaning to transformative social change and attaching it to profit-based interests, they risk obfuscating the persistence of systemic inequities and, in turn, deputize the individual as the first line of defense against relations of subjugation. By feigning embrace of transformative politics through incorporating the associated discourse or through endorsing particularly non-threatening approaches to change, the state is able to more efficiently modulate organizing efforts that challenge neoliberal capitalist logic and its attendant interests. At the same time, this assimilationist maneuver contributes to post-racial, post-feminist discourses by suggesting that we have, in fact, arrived at the equitable future for which so many have organized and that for any work that does remain moderate reforms will do. In this way, it risks disincentivizing and deradicalizing progressive organizing efforts.

Toward New Conceptual Imaginings

To return to the epigraph that opened this chapter, how might we heed Foucault's (1982) call to "liberate us both from the economy and from the type of individualization that is linked to the economy" (p. 216)? What might this mean for dearly-held concepts in community organizing like burnout and self-care? Is it possible to reclaim them from the grip of neoliberalism, or is the pull of liberal humanism that birthed it just too powerful?

In this chapter, I've argued that "burnout" and "self-care" have been colonized by neoliberal rationality and participate in elevating the individual as the source of and solution to a range of sociopolitical, material-discursive harms with the effect of tempering transformative community organizing efforts. While I take very seriously the range of affects (exhaustion, stress, resentment, frustration) that burnout describes – and I think these affects warrant attention – I fear the concepts we currently use to lend meaning to them foreclose possibilities of ways of relating more justly and sustainably outside the mirage of neoliberal subjection. I am curious about how our concepts are *productive*, how they erase and open up possibilities for thought and action. In the following chapter, I explore the threat of neoliberal co-optation as an *ontological problem* that relational theories of being might help us think about more creatively. I theorize how the Cartesian humanism that serves as the basis for the neoliberalized subject shrouds material-discursive conditions, forecloses possibilities for thought and action, and diminishes notions of collective responsibility and, ultimately, I gesture toward the possibility of relational, emergent ontologies as a mode by which to insert *movement* into burnout's conceptual underpinnings and illuminate avenues for nurturing more sustainable community organizing engagements.

CHAPTER 4

ONTOLOGY AND BURNOUT DISCOURSE: TOWARD RELATIONAL, EMERGENT ONTOLOGIES AS POLITICAL POSSIBILITY

"Humanity has become so enamored of the image it has painted of its illusory beautiful life that it has not only come close to vanquishing all other life forms, and has not only imagined itself as a single and self-evidentiary valuable being with a right to life, it can also only imagine a future of living on rather than face the threat of living otherwise."

(Colebrook, 2014, p. 142)

Introduction

In chapter three, I theorized how burnout and self-care discourses have been co-opted by neoliberal rationality in two principal ways: (1) through their reinscription of the individualist subject, and (2) in their entanglement with state power to the effect of delegitimizing and disincentivizing social movements that challenge relations of domination. In this chapter, I analyze "burnout" and "self-care" discourses – and how they're taken up by neoliberal rationality – as *ontological* problems. I'm curious about the political possibilities of a *relational, emergent ontology*; namely, if we lived this kind of ontology, would we work together differently? Would burnout and its enabling precarities even be possible, and how might we dislodge *care* from neoliberal logics? To explore these questions, I begin by reviewing the assumptions of the individualist, Cartesian ontology that neoliberal rationality weaponizes, drawing primarily from the work of Sylvia Wynter, whose philosophy lies at the nexus of Black studies, anti-

colonialism, and ontology. Then, I transition to outlining the promise of relational, emergent ontologies, and I position the *performative* as a mode through which to rearticulate concepts in the service of an ontological remaking. In the final two sections, I ponder the conceptual utility of "burnout" and "self-care" in a relational ontology, drawing from my conversations with organizers to explore the possibility of relational emergence as a *micro-utopic practice* of getting unstuck and *caring for the relation* that Cartesian ontologies insist on separating and stabilizing.

Cartesian Ontologies

Foucault (1984) described humanism as "a theme, or rather, a set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time, in Euro-American societies; these themes, always tied to value judgments, have obviously varied greatly in their content, as well as in the values they have preserved" (p. 44). In other words, the broad ontological category of "humanism" has undergone many mutations and initiated powerful classificatory schemes.

Descartes and other Enlightenment-era philosophers had a profound influence on understandings of being and knowledge construction in the Euro-American world that persists as a dominant logic in the contemporary United States. Descartes' seemingly innocuous, 17th century musings about mathematics, objectivity, and rationality invented and popularized a "description of human being" (St. Pierre, 2012, p. 486), or what Wynter (2003) called a "genre of the human" (p. 269), rooted in self/other, mind/body, and being/knowing binaries inspired a diverse range of intellectual and philosophical developments that we now refer to as the Enlightenment. Specifically, Descartes articulated a scientized image of the human as a discrete, rational individual, capable as a

knower of a world out there separate from him. This emphasis on knowledge as something that "can be innocent and outside power relations" (St. Pierre, 2013b, p. 648) has had a crucial influence on the organization of social and political life in the Western world across centuries.

The Violent and Overdetermined Contours of Cartesian Humanism

Extending and revising Foucault's critique of humanism, Wynter (2003) connected the rationalist, Cartesian "genre of the human" (p. 269) that came to shape the epistemes of western modernity to the historical context of "the European arrival in the New World, economic expansions, and new religious and secular politics [that] ruptured existing planetary organizations and forced a reconsideration of how the self, other, and space are imagined" (McKittrick, 2006, p. 124). More specifically, Wynter (2003) traced how Latin-Christian Europe's medieval-era theocentric "descriptive statement" (p. 263) of the human and associated ontological distinctions between the heavens (the realm of the divine) and Earth (the realm of the fallen sinners) took on two principal "degodded" (p. 263) transformations that produced distinct "slot[s] of Otherness" (p. 266), or what Butler (1993/2011a) might have called the contingent, constitutive *outside*. The first, which Wynter (2003) called "Man1," emerged with the advent of Renaissance-era intellectual developments that introduced revelations on the "natural" world and the physical sciences, bringing into being a rational political subject who, while still *divinely created* with the capacity to reason, was also able to know and comprehend the physical world.

The second ontological description, which Wynter (2003) called "Man2," enlivened a "bio-economic subject" (p. 318) that emerged in the 19th century in the

context of Darwinian evolution and Malthus's theories about scarcity and population control. Central to Wynter's (2003) critical genealogy of these descriptions of the human are analyses of their entanglement with colonial and imperial projects, as well as their underlying "principle of nonhomogeneity" (p. 274) that served not only to institute divisions between the human and non-human worlds but also to legitimize violent hierarchies *among* humans.

Wynter's (2003) historical analysis is important in that it succeeds in denormalizing singular or totalizing definitions of "the human," elaborating instead a series of definitional transformations, each of which came with their own set of attendant Others and "overrepresent[ed] itself as if it were the human itself" (p. 260). The elaboration of Man1, the rational political subject, formed alongside not only the physical sciences and the debunking of theocentric assumptions about the perfection of the celestial world but also 15th century religious voyages wherein "early explorers and religious evangelists had to make sense of a world, and cultures, they had previously considered nonexistent" (McKittrick, 2006, p. 125). These early encounters formed the basis for new classificatory divisions between the reasonable, knowledgeable Western explorer and the Indigenous inhabitants whose difference was only legible in terms of God-given rationality, and because the inhabitants hadn't yet been "touched" by the familiar, Latin-Christian divine, they must be "enemies of Christ" (Wynter, 2003, p. 266) who were not endowed with the gift of rationality and so their subjugation and enslavement were justified.

The description of bio-economic Man2 emerged alongside "the rise of the biological sciences, transatlantic slavery, and land exploitation" (McKittrick, 2006, p.

124) and in the context of the invalidation of the prior so-called "enemies of Christ" legitimation on the grounds that the "Christ's apostles had never reached the New World" (Wynter, 2003, p. 293). So there was no actual gospel for the Indigenous peoples to have refused and a new legitimating criterion was needed. Referencing Wynter, McKittrick (2006) noted how in the face of this crisis, "Man had to be worked out differently, humanness altered, on terms that spiritually legitimated a nonindigenous New World presence and the profitable dehumanization of indigenous and enslaved black cultures" (p. 126). This demand for a new articulation to justify territorializing, colonialist ends instigated a new category of Otherness built around "phenotypical and religio-cultural differences between human variations and/or population groups" (Wynter, 2003, p. 296) and the associated invention of race as a mode of difference upon which to project claims of irrationality, unnaturalness, and inferiority.

Wynter described these dominant "genres of the human" as a series of projections where old hierarchies and binaries took on new form, manufacturing categories on which to map new justificatory systems of valuation that had implications for the broader ordering of social and political life. We might consider these articulations as enactments of what Barad (2020) called *the void* – "a much-valued apparatus of colonialism, […] a way of offering justification for claims of ownership in the 'discovery' of 'virgin' territory – the particular notion that 'untended,' 'uncultivated,' 'uncivilized" spaces are *empty* rather than plentiful" (p. 92). In other words, the construction of these genres furthered and legitimated colonial, exploitative projects by elaborating a particular image of the human that excluded Black and Indigenous populations, effectively casting them into nothingness and rendering them illegible and exploitable. These ontological

descriptions, while emerging in distinct religious and sociopolitical contexts, masqueraded as natural and normal and ultimately delineated "which humans count as humans" (Butler, 2015, p. 36). Wynter (2003) compellingly noted how the Latin-Christian basis of Man1 and its Christian antecedent induced "the subjects of these orders to experience their placement in the structuring hierarchies of the order as having been extrahumanly […] designed and/or determined, rather than as veridically or systemically produced by our collective human agency" (p. 315). This (super)naturalizing of the order of things failed to accommodate an analysis of power relations and reproduced the Enlightenment's fictions about objectivity. St. Pierre (2000) noted how Cartesian reason (the defining feature of Wynter's Man1) operates as a "grand narrative […] by removing itself from the realm of human activity" (p. 486), thereby letting the social world essentially off the hook for the consequences of these divisionary practices. The same obfuscatory logic continued in the case of Man2, wherein we persisted in "project[ing] our collective authorship of our contemporary order onto the imagined agency of Evolution and Natural Selection and, by extrapolation, onto the 'Invisible Hand' of the 'Free Market'" (Wynter, 2003, p. 317). In other words, new categories of racialized and classed human Others were created as a result of this description of the human and yet their precarity gets largely attributed to natural, outside forces to be grappled with not on the scale of systemic or social relations, but rather at the level of individual resiliency. This is an example of the possible horrors of objectivity and representationalism, which, "[l]ike a magician, […] would have us focus on what seems to be evidently given, hiding the very practices that produce the illusion of givenness" (Barad, 2007, p. 360). This particular inscription of humanness set to establish a naturalized truth, one that wouldn't

be so habitually reproduced in a relational, emergent ontology that demands we "face the threat of living otherwise" (Colebrook, 2014, p. 142).

Relational, Emergent Ontologies

While the scale and persistence of centuries-old ontologies in the Euro-American world demonstrate just how violent and productive ontology is in relation to the entire social order and its associated realm of possibility, Wynter's work offers a sense of hope, too, in that "Man," which has come to stand in for "human," is neither natural nor totalizing. Societies spanning time and geographies do live and have lived ontologies other than that described by Cartesian humanism and its racialized, neoliberal, "bioeconomic" (Wynter, 2003, p. 318) offshoot. For example, Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt (2019) articulated how agent ontologies – wherein the capacity for agency is distributed non-hierarchically across humans and non-human entanglements – were communicated by Indigenous thinkers "thousands of years earlier than contemporary philosophers of science" (p. 332). And while there exists a variety of distinctive practices and assumptions among the diverse Indigenous communities of the world, it's clear that different, non-Cartesian ontologies are and have long been at work. Watts (2013), for example, contrasted Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe cosmologies with western humanism, noting the animacy of "habitats and ecosystems" in these Indigenous cosmologies and highlighting that they are "better understood as societies […], meaning that they have ethical structures, inter-species treaties and agreements, and further their ability to interpret, understand and implement" (p. 23). There are ways of being, then, other than those described by Descartes and Enlightenment-era humanists. Relational ontologies "are not precious – people live their lives this way!" (E.A. St. Pierre, personal

communication, April 27, 2021) and I find promise in the *viability* of living another ontology.

What I'm calling *relational, emergent ontologies* are philosophies of being in the world that attend to relations as political and ethical sites for a process of continual emergence and becoming. In this section, I draw from feminist and posthumanist thinkers to explore the affordances of relational, emergent ontologies that invite new ways of relating outside the threat of burnout and offer alternative articulations of caring in/of/with worldly relations.

Relational Entanglements

One of the dangers of neoliberal logic's construction and romanticization of the individualist subject is the labor it performs to obscure the material-discursive entanglements that circumscribe the perceived set of choices we believe ourselves to have at any given moment and thus our perceived avenues for thought and action. Barad (2007) challenged the binary logic inhering in the Cartesian, dualistic "image of thought" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991/1994, p. 37), positing an *entangled relationship* between the discursive world and the material "objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972/2010, p. 49), muddying the distinction between self/other, past/present, and cause/effect and assigning vitality and agency more expansively. Unlike conventional materialists who commonly understand reality as structured through a set of material relations, and in contrast to many (but certainly not all) poststructural thinkers who attribute a heightened explanatory power to language, Barad (2010) suggested "*the co-constitution* of determinately bounded and propertied entities" (p. 253, emphasis added). In so doing, Barad denaturalized the boundaries we've created with our "dividing practices"

(Foucault, 1982, p. 208) and posited the *always-already entangled relation* as the onto-epistemological unit. That is, the material things of our world are active participants in discursive constructions, and vice-versa. Material life and discourse that "constrains and enables what can be said" (Barad, 2007, p. 146) (and thought) are not static or discrete entities but shift and rely on one another for their explanatory power. With this ontological offering, Barad offered her challenge to the Enlightenment humanist subject "which is so tangled in separation and domination" (Gumbs, 2020, p. 9), constructing this entanglement not as a static, unified whole but rather a partial and processual project always in the process of *becoming*.

When we take the *relation* as the cluster of interest, as opposed to the individuated self, an alternative conceptualization of responsibility emerges that renders the neoliberalized notion of individual responsibilization unthinkable, or, at least, unconvincing. Brown (2015) noted how neoliberal discourse and its underlying ontological assumptions construct "responsibilized individuals [who] are required to provide for themselves in the context of powers and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so" (p. 134). But in an ontology where the relation – which is always already multiple and diffused across time/place – is the unit of analysis, this idea of an atomized "self" who is fully deputized for their independent wellbeing and rationally enacts free-will to craft their lives is destabilized. To assume a scenario in which we are always-already entangled is to grasp the urgency of "being bound to the other […] who is irreducibly and materially bound to, threaded through, the 'self'" (Barad, 2010, p. 265). In this relational ontology, community assumes new shape as an enactment (as I articulated in chapter one) that takes seriously the necessity of *risk*. Hong (2015a),

drawing on Audre Lorde, put it thusly: “An alternative imagination of community that does not depend on identification or equivalence is neither easy nor utopian, for a truly relational vision of community must mean being willing to jeopardize one’s own security for that of others” (p. 6).

Barad (2010) elaborated a similar notion, suggesting that “to put oneself at risk” (p. 264) is a necessary feature of an entangled ontology. Responsibility isn’t an intention for Barad; it is an ethical stance mandated and constituted by/through “the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” (Barad, 2007, p. 393). In other words, a relational ontology means, in one sense, giving up the fiction that we were ever just a single self and adjusting our politics and ethics accordingly. What happens when – especially for those who are on the dominant side of Descartes’ cherished difference binaries – we take responsibility for how we are implicated in the harm and exclusion endured by generations of subjugated populations? What mythologies can no longer endure when “my” history, “my” actions, and “my” entitlements are demystified to show that they are/were never just “mine”? I suspect neoliberalism could not survive in this ontology. It’s conceptual supports –primarily individualism and economization – come to seem foolish in an arrangement that doesn’t tolerate such reductions.

Gumbs’ (2020) exploration of the affinities between human life and marine mammalian life is a striking example of the kinds of openings that are possible in a relational, emergent ontology. Gumbs (2020), regarding herself “*as* a mammal” (p. 5) and as a “marine mammal apprentice” (p. 9), traced the movements and practices of aquatic mammals (whom she called her “kin”) as an ethical and political effort of learning more just and sustainable ways to relate, to collaborate, and to move through the multiple trans-

species threats that hover, from climate crisis to capitalism and anti-Blackness. In a series of poetic "meditations" (Gumbs, 2020, p. 8) about the extractive and imperializing gestures of science, the swift adaptations of dolphins, the fugitivity of whales and monk seals, and more, Gumbs (2020) drew Black feminist lessons for collaborating and living differently with and across species. She invited us to "be moved by what [we] can't name" (p. 112) and "allow the boundaries of who we are [to] become more fluid" (p. 8). In these musings, I read Gumbs as enacting the very sort of relational, emergent ontology that is so difficult to even *think*. She challenged the categorizing tools of conventional science that draws lines around who is what and instead suggested a sort of accountable entanglement, what Braidotti (2019) called a "transversal alliance" (p. 36) that has the capacity to "flow across and displace the binaries" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 33) in which Cartesian humanism and neoliberalism are invested. In calling attention to human/mammalian affinities, Gumbs gestures toward a new "genre of the human" (Wynter, 2003, p. 269) that invites us "to live more porously" (Gumbs, 2020, p. 61), to touch the other who is *all* others (Barad, 2020)[5].

Emergence and Becoming

"Gratitude to those who have made movement their method, upheaval their home"

(Gumbs, 2020, p. 79)

St. Pierre (2019) described an "ontology of immanence" as attending to that which "might be" and is "coming into being" (p. 4), and this figuration is central to what I'm calling relational, emergent ontologies. In the current of thought that engages the concept of *immanence*, based largely on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, immanent

[5] In summarizing quantum field theory, Barad (2020) wrote, "All touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the other is touching all others, including the 'self,' and touching the 'self' is a matter of touching the stranger within" (p. 95).

ontology is likened to a "one-world ontology, [as] opposed to the transcendent, which is based on a two-world ontology" (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 4). St. Pierre (2019) recalled Aristotle's "real" vs. "ideal" distinction as an example *par excellence* of a dualist, transcendental ontology at work that organizes the world according to a vertical logic and registers differences as "ontological absolutes" (Weheliye, 2014, p. 31). Accordingly, Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) critiqued all manner of divisions, including what they called the "tripartite division" (p. 23) between representation, language, and the intentional subject, inviting instead an ontology of vibrancy, connectivity, and experimentation. This notion of immanence is not to diminish or erase the very real divisions and harms caused by all number of constructed hierarchies – from those maintained by racism and patriarchy to those invested in anthropocentrism. Instead, these hierarchies are *denaturalized* and rethought as what Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) called "strata," or, "accumulations, coagulations, sedimentations, foldings" (p. 502). Strata and the divisions they perform make things *stand still* and direct or concentrate power in a particular way, enacting a "magic capture" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 427), of sorts, such that the sedimentation "appears as preaccomplished and self-presupposing" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 427). In other words, this ontology of movement and multiplicity urges the political task of putting into continuous variation that which has been trapped, territorialized, "frozen in time like little statues" (Barad, 2007, p. 91).

In an ontology of immanence, the very notion of "being" is put in motion, dislodged from its naturalizing and stabilizing moorings in favor of *becoming*. For Barad (2007) *becoming* accounts for a sort of ongoing dynamism wherein "the world and its

possibilities […] are remade with each moment" (p. 396). In this ontology, what Enlightenment humanism positions as *a priori* fixities are no more than territorializing gestures wherein "[c]uriosity calcifies into certainty" (Montgomery & bergman, 2017, p. 177). brown (2017) reminded us that "there is no such thing as a blank canvas, an empty land, or a new idea – but everywhere there is complex, ancient, fertile ground full of potential" (p. 10). This is an opening into possibility, inviting radical imagination and experimentation as to *all the ways* we can transform, remake, and rearrange our world, including those we can't even think yet. It encourages an ongoing curiosity not of the imperialist brand (which seeks to understand, order, colonize) but a curiosity about the *capacity* of our relationships and the possibility of those connections that are "eccentric, immemorial, or yet to come" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 505). Politically, it demands the sort of ongoing accountability that Barad (2007; 2010) described; if we are always becoming with/in the world, then the ruses like those constructed by early Cartesian humanists that Wynter (2003) traced – ruses to manufacture relations of subjugation to justify imperial power – become ontologically unfeasible because to control, suppress, or violate the other is to harm the other that touches, is "threaded through" (Barad, 2010, p. 265) oneself. For brown (2017) this ongoing practice of emergence, of becoming, "emphasizes critical connections over critical mass" (p. 3). To honor and nurture the connection, the *relation*, as such, lends a whole new meaning to being *in movement* together.

The Performative as a Mode of Ontological Remaking

"I want to remember it's a performance and then I want to transform it." (Gumbs, 2020, p. 8)

Wynter's (2003) genealogy of the two descriptions of Man (Man1 and Man2) I described at the beginning of this chapter is useful for thinking about how the individualist neoliberal subject (Man2, in Wynter's formulation) is just that: a *description* produced and co-constituted by the traces of its medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment-era evangelisms, philosophies, and imperialisms. It carries with it, too, an array of material-discursive divisions, valuations, and precarities. With Butler (1993/2011a; 2015), I find promise in the possibility of the performative as a mode through which to practice an ontological remaking (at least in part), to deputize *concepts* as entryways into the cracks of normalized and dominant modes of being such that we might escape "Enlightenment humanism's enclosure" (St. Pierre, 2013b, p. 648) and fashion other modes of being in service of the type of world(s) many community organizers strive to create. More specifically, given the conceptual supports necessary to produce, maintain, and naturalize a given description of the human, I'm curious about how we might create new or rearticulate old concepts that help us navigate the "cruel and curious quandaries" (Butler, 2015, p. 37) of the violent divisionary practices enabled by the Cartesian description of the human through which neoliberalism is thinkable.

Butler (1993/2011a) described performativity "not as a single or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (p. xii). Power, in this case, comes through the force of repetition; only after a particular discourse is repeated again and again does it carry the force of a "norm," and this normative status is what affords it its productive capacity, recognizability, and set of associated valuations. Discourse isn't a purely linguistic formation, then; it is entangled with materiality. For Butler, repetition can also be a site for subversion because

of the impossibility of purely fulfilling the ideal that the discourse communicates. Butler (1993/2011a) wrote, “the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute ‘we’ cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience” (p. 84). This ambiguity leaves the door open for refusing and/or creating new terms by which to be, relate, and politically act. The material-discursive relationship that the “performative” describes is a possibility-making principle insofar as available discourses shape and suggest a particular set of directions or potentialities. And so each performative enactment carries with it the possibility to “enact” differently which, in turn, rearticulates the operative norm and enables a different set of material-discursive potentialities. Highlighting the urgency of such rearticulations, Butler (2015) asked,

> Are there forms of sexuality for which there is no good vocabulary precisely because the powerful logics that determine how we think about desire, orientation, sexual acts, and pleasures do not allow them to become legible? Is there not a critical demand to rethink our existing vocabularies, or revalorize devalued names and forms of address precisely to open up the norms that limit not only what is thinkable, but the thinkability of gender nonconforming lives? (p. 38)

I am motivated by a similar question: Are there forms of organizing for which there is no good vocabulary precisely because the powerful logics that determine how we think about the self, care, and politics do not allow them to become legible? Is there not a critical demand to rethink our existing vocabularies to open up the norms that limit what is thinkable for our collective work? In other words, I’m curious about the relationship between the conceptual supports that permeate our organizing work and how those

concepts – specifically, burnout and self-care – rely on a particular ontological description that constrains and enables certain political possibilities.

In my conversations with one of the migrant rights organizers, Andres, he emphasized this idea, making a compelling case about how where we focus our discursive energy shapes what feels possible for thought and action. During the closing go-around at the second group roundtable, Andres chimed in with his thoughts about burnout as a concept. Laughing, he noted that he was thinking about burnout in terms of orgasms, describing how both are the "result of [a] process." He elaborated:

> When we talk about burnout, we focus on the burnout and we try to avoid it and we center conversations around that. […] But what I feel is [*laughter*] that we miss that…the heart, all the things that are *in between*. […] And in my work of liberation, *I'm in love with the process*. In that process I met all of you. In that process I start organizing. (emphasis added)

I've sat with this piece of wisdom, meditated on its implications, and felt invigorated by its possibilities. Andres was encouraging us to ask ourselves whether "burnout" is even the concept around which we should orient our collective musings or whether it risks obscuring the complexity of the *in-between*. On the one hand, I worried whether this suggestion – and even this entire project that I've designed around exposing the conceptual limitations of burnout discourse – is a fair one. I've thought about whether I'm inadvertently dismissing the experiences of chronically overworked organizers (a positionality I'm very familiar with) by deconstructing the available language that organizers themselves often use to describe their affective experience. But on the other hand, I felt affirmed by Andres' insight and the reminder that we create and foreclose

possibilities when we draw on particular discourses. And ultimately, my aim is not to dismiss the injustices that contribute to what many organizers describe as "burnout" or even to suggest that we stop using the term (I certainly don't have the authority to make such a grand proclamation). Instead, I want to think about burnout discourse as complicit in an ontological closure, one that suggests there is a singular "I" to be burnt out and to remedy the symptoms. I want to consider how a relational, emergent ontological orientation might make burnout irrelevant, both as a concept with an individual referent and as an explanatory tool for a set of harms that transgress individualism. Ultimately, I am curious about how a relational, emergent ontology might help construct a more vibrant, sustainable, life-affirming *in-between*.

Implications for Burnout and Care in Community Organizing

> *"Uncertainty is where we need to begin, because experimentation and curiosity is part of what has been stolen from us. Empire works in part by making us feel impotent, corroding our abilities to shape worlds together."* (Montgomery & bergman, 2017, p. 33)

To position burnout and self-care discourses in community organizing as ontological problems may seem lofty, but situating these discourses in a particular philosophy of being is useful for engaging the possibilities that they capacitate and foreclose. How we conceptualize what it means to be this or that, and who *gets* to be this or that, has important implications for how power flows and if/where it gets sedimented. Wynter noted, "It is this issue of the 'genre' of 'Man' that causes all the 'isms'" (Thomas, 2006, p. 20) and so to attend to the harms of neoliberalism, for example, requires an analysis of the description of the human in which neoliberalism is thinkable. I'm curious about how the concepts we use to describe what happens in community organizing risk

producing a certain individualist mode of being – particularly a neoliberalized individual made possible by Cartesian humanism – that is, in many ways, antagonistic to the just political futures that many progressive organizing efforts demand. Andres compellingly noted in our one-on-one conversation that "we repeat injustice in our own circles of organizing." I'm curious, then, about how an ontological refiguring might not only render some forms of subjugation obsolete, but also enable different concepts that allow us to dislodge from unjust logics, to embrace the "something [that] may always go awry" (Butler, 2015, p. 31) as an invitation to practice organizing and relating differently.

Rearticulating Burnout and Care

In a relational, emergent ontology, "burnout" and "self-care," as such, gain new expression as non-individualized, non-teleological processes. Perhaps, in this ontology, the conditions that contribute to burnout and what Berlant (2011) called "attrition" (p. 25) – the forces of capitalism, racism, neoliberalism, and more – would not be thinkable because to construct such a hierarchy of control would be to intractably implicate oneself in the associated harms. However, I'm under no impression that abolishing Cartesian humanism and enacting a relational, emergent ontology in a swift and totalizing fashion is possible, nor is that my project here. Instead, I'm interested in how concepts like burnout and self-care carry within them traces of Cartesian humanism and the neoliberal discourse it makes possible, and how we might rearticulate these concepts as a different modality for living and organizing in accordance with relational emergence.

How can we describe the affective dimensions of relations of subjugation without concentrating those affects within the individual themselves? In other words, how can we decenter the "I" or "you" that is the referent of "burnout" and fashion discursive

constructions that draw attention to the complex set of relations that make burnout's associated affects (exhaustion, overwork, resentment, etc.) possible? The goal here is not to diminish the very real impacts of what is commonly described as "burnout;" instead, it is to draw attention to the limitations of this figuration and remind us that any stuck place is "*always open to future reworkings*" (Barad, 2010, p. 260) that help us dislodge from fixity. To do so is to open up a broader range of relations across which to distribute responsibility and accountability, in alignment with Barad's (2007; 2010) call, so that the demand for a remedy does not fall on the individual self to provide care or to cope. I am motivated by Montgomery and bergman's (2017) insight that escaping rigidity or getting unstuck (in their case, from *rigid radicalism*) is not a singular or totalizing enactment; "[t]here are only openings, searches, and the collective discovery of new and old ways of moving that let in fresh air" (p. 172).

Toward a Care for the Relation

Forwarding an alternative conception of care, a *care for the relation*, for the imaginative work of continuing to open up that which has been stifled or closed off, seems like one such avenue for advancing a relational, emergent ontology. In this figuration, I imagine care not as an act of reciprocity or saviorism but an accountable attunement to the entanglements of which we are always already apart. To care, then, is to steward the health of a capacious world and an expansive definition of the human – it is care on an ontological level, or what Braidotti (2011) called "the ethics of nonprofit at an ontological level" (p. 298). Care detaches from neoliberalism's supplied myth of individual industrialism, and responsibility for care is distributed more broadly, requiring a radical rethinking of the economy, the community, and the role of government. In

describing what she named *emergent strategy*, brown (2017) called for a move into "right relationship," emphasizing the relational connections needed to "grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for" (p. 24). Similarly, The Care Collective (2020) invested with political possibility "new caring imaginaries" (p. 94) that take seriously our entanglement and demand a range of material-discursive and infrastructural supports that enable our capacity to care on a truly universal scale. For The Care Collective (2020), this reimagining involves a collectivization of resources, flourishing public space, resources that nurture human and non-human life, shorter working hours, and a care-based economy, just to name a few. I am enthusiastic about the possibility of community organizing settings as one such locus for this reconceptualization, an "everyday utopia" (Cooper, 2014, p. 2) that is always becoming where we can practice the ways of being we strive to make universally possible through political organizing. Care in a relational, emergent ontology invites us to nurture the possibilities we've not yet thought rather than settle into our sureties. For Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987), "[t]he undecidable is the germ and locus par excellence of revolutionary decisions" (p. 473) and so to care for the relation is to activate and nurture the connective nodes and alliances through which to fashion new political possibilities and articulations of what it means to be human.

In the following section, I attend to how organizers have *moved through* tensions and stuck places I wrote about in chapter three, and at times, enacted this alternative vision of care and relationality. By focusing on the relations and practices that have nourished organizers' capacity to "do the next thing" (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 605), I strive to highlight the ambiguity of ontological figurations and the possibility of organizing, now,

as an "active experiment with the composition of sustainable communities" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 272). The brand of neoliberalized, Cartesian humanism that I take issue with in this project is neither permanent nor totalizing. Relational, emergent ways of being in organizing are possible, even amid the smothering mirage of neoliberalized Cartesian humanism.

Imagining Relational Emergence in Organizing

The organizers I spoke with in one-on-one and group roundtable discussions described tensions, conflicts, surprises, turning points, and stuck places they encountered in their work, some of which I explored in chapter three. I approached our conversations using these terms – rather than burnout – because they capture a more expansive set of encounters while also inviting organizers to elaborate if and how they got *unstuck*. This linguistic formation promotes the ongoing *movement* that relational, emergent ontologies celebrate. While Cartesian ontologies are normative and dominant in the U.S., they are not totalizing. Progressive political organizing sites are especially ripe for this kind of practice that aligns with, or prefigures, the kind of world(s) we strive to create through organizing in the first place. The question for Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) was how to *deterritorialize* that which has been captured by what Montgomery and bergman (2017) called "Empire" and how to keep things in constant motion so as to avoid the hardening of relations into the kinds of violent hierarchies for which movements across the globe are actively seeking recognition and redress. Community organizing settings are, largely, already engaged in the political work of reforming/transforming/abolishing harmful systems and institutions. So, the question that animates this section is how organizers – despite the tensions, conflicts, frustrations, and stuck places they've

experienced along the way – also, at times, have *lived* and *organized* in accordance with a relational, emergent ontology. How is this a sort of deterritorializing gesture and what possibilities are there to draw attention to this way of living as a *micro-utopic practice* that reshapes the conceptual and material possibilities of social life? Utopia, in this sense, isn't a static and determined future but rather "dynamic spaces committed to relational ways of being, spaces that are never done, never finalized, always in process and becoming" (Jones & Woglom, 2016, p. 159). I find promise in the notion that we can create something new, something more desirable, in the cracks of Empire.

In a relational, emergent ontology, we are all implicated and responsible for the self/other/world (which can't be tidily divided as such) because we are and never were distinct, atomized individuals. Perhaps if this ontology were dominant, the kinds of "care infrastructure" The Care Collective (2020) advocated would capacitate a culture of collective organizing aligned with "a new calculus of response-ability" (Barad, 2010, p. 251) in which we're all deputized and equipped to care for the expansive set of relations that make "each" of us possible. As a micro-utopic practice in the absence of a new dominant ontology, I wonder about the possibilities of tending to *relations* over pre-determined projects or outcomes. Many organizers already do this to some degree; they let emergent connection guide their work, and they make celebration a fixture of how they stay in motion. These, I think, constitute "alternative practices of subjectivity" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 275) that have transformative possibilities.

The Emergent Vibrancies of Community

Andres' approach to organizing, in many ways, reflects a relational, emergent way of being in the world. In chapter three, I described one of Andres' encounters with

racism and classism in organizing and how, while he ultimately disengaged from the partnership with the university professors, he did not quit organizing altogether. Andres had a "caring community" (The Care Collective, 2020, p. 45) defined by mutual support on which to rely. He described his understanding of community as abundant and capable and prided himself on building trust and relationships with the local migrant community. He talked about the annual festival his organization hosts to celebrate Latin American culture and how, on the one hand, the festival was a way to disrupt the dominant political discourse and to humanize undocumented immigrants as *more than* just their economic contributions. On the other hand, the festival was a political modality through which to, as Andres put it, "mobilize the community." For one of the earlier festivals, one of Andres' neighbors in the neighborhood of mostly Latin American immigrants where he lived cut bamboo to make an arch for the stage, and another neighbor made all the decorations. Staff members at the local university printed the flyers at their offices, and Andres' brother helped transport one of the neighbor's decks which they used as a stage. This is a stunning example of community collaboration and capacity and it took place outside formal institutions and without organized funding from the nonprofit industrial complex. Butler (2011b) wrote about how collective action exceeds the mobilization of individual bodies; it involves, too, a range of material supports. This collaborative act of "find[ing] and produc[ing] the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments" (Butler, 2011b, p. 1) is an inevitable feature of collective action. "Human action," argued Butler (2011b), "is always supported action" (p. 1). To appreciate the significance of the animacy of multiple materialities – of the bamboo arch,

of the decorations, of the flyers, of the stage – in struggles for change is to be in relation differently, more expansively. “All that we need was in the community,” Andres said.

This is an example of what a relational, emergent ontology can make possible. Andres and his fellow organizers and neighbors practiced a sort of purposeful and trustful interdependency *even within* a broader context where Cartesian ontology and attendant neoliberal discourse is intent on dividing and thrusting into competition especially the most precarious communities. This collaborative, emergent process of arranging an event using the resources that migrant communities and their allies *already have* and are willing to lend is in contrast to the extractive, excessive logic of neoliberal capitalism. It highlights, too, an expansive notion of being/knowing as comprising more than what an academic credential can recognize. Andres phrased it well:

> [for a] long time, I believe that we have a kind of knowledge. […] In the school we learn things, and they teach us some things, but in our house our parents, our siblings, they teach us other things. And those kind of things are with us all the time. And […] some of that knowledge is […] our ancestors’ because […] that knowledge was taught by our parents, they were taught by their parents and their parents, […] and so, for many generations we’ve been pass[ing] a kind of knowledge which is not writing, which is a kind of… I don’t know, it’s deep in our DNA. And I think that is where our humanity resides.

We might view this, then, as a micro-utopic practice of living otherwise, living *in relation* as both a political strategy to resist epistemic and other forces of oppression and also as mode of practicing a more expansive, sustainable elaboration of humanity other than the narrow one described by Cartesian humanism. St. Pierre (2013b) urged us to

remember that "rethink[ing] the nature of being […] *is an ethical charge*" and that "we have to think possible worlds in which we might live" (p. 654-5). Andres' example shows this alignment in motion, a fusing together of that which was never separate in the first place: the things we think with and our way of being with/in the world. Gumbs (2020) compellingly asked, "What are the intergenerational and evolutionary ways that we become what we practice? How can we navigate oppressive environments with core practices that build community, resistance, and more loving ways of living?" (p. 43). Perhaps Andres' story is one such practice, a collective practice of becoming.

Nurturing Connections and Preserving "Fragile Leverage"

In my one-on-one conversations with Cristina and V, they each described how particular relationships in their organizing are what enabled them to keep going. Cristina is an immigrant rights and liberation organizer who was moved to get involved after attending a forum in support of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and an end to deportations in the wake of Donald Trump's election. She said witnessing family separations and deportations in her community compelled her to get engaged: "Pero yo quería hacer algo. Yo sentía la necesidad de hacer algo" ["But I wanted to do something. I felt the necessity of doing something"]. This initial encounter introduced Cristina to a community of organizers that became her "la familia política" ["political family"], a community with whom she also learned, healed, and grew as an organizer. They not only read books together, attended trainings, and organized demonstrations but also talked about their lives. "Outside of the organizing work," Cristina said, "we always end up talking. It doesn't have to always be about the work, so we've had those moments of healing too" ["siempre de alguna manera siempre terminamos hablando, no tiene que ser

siempre de trabajo, entonces hemos tomado esos momentos de sanación también"]. V also commented on a relationship that has most sustained her during her organizing and advocacy journey, characterizing it as one that grew "out of friendship first" with Harriett, another organizer I spoke with as part of this project. This relationship, for V, made collaboration on organizing projects all the more nourishing because it wasn't a collaboration founded on an instrumentalist logic that capitalism promotes; it was built on a basis of trust and connection that reached beyond any singular project. V said, "collaboration for me is not like, this one project you work on. It is something you build on and it keeps growing and growing and growing." V and Cristina's trust in these relationships as healthy sites from which to organize and advocate is a promising relational, emergent practice that makes "connections and commitments" (Barad, 2010, p. 266) the basis for sustainable, collaborative action.

Taylor noted his efforts to bring an ethos of creativity and joy to the social and economic justice organization he co-founded, noting how this ethos was especially critical in a context where "nobody was getting paid." Taylor described his effort to preserve the "fragile leverage" that exists with volunteer organizers – leverage, he said, founded on "trust and encouragement." One time, after winning a local campaign to get the buses to run on Sundays, he snuck a bottle of champagne into the Board of Directors meeting "because we needed to celebrate these victories and how this was because of everybody working together." Taylor described how the grassroots work only moved forward because of an emergent community comprised of "layers of people," from "the person who can just send an email […] 'cause they had five minutes, to the person who is an artist who's willing to like, go into their basement and spend hours [and] hours screen

printing posters for you, and just […] anywhere between." This emergent process in which movement depends on the varying capacities of a multitude reflects the sort of mutual support that Andres described, too, in his comments about the early festival-planning process. This practice of distributing responsibility broadly and accommodating a range of capacities can demystify what counts as "organizing" and "activism" while also modeling the entangled relations of responsibility that a relational, emergent ontology encourages.

The Affective and Ontological Possibilities of Protest

Many of the organizers also talked about protests as among the most nourishing aspects of organizing, invoking how the creativity of the collective action – enlivened with/through multiple materialities that make the action possible – inspired new connections and a sense of joy. If we understand *joy* in the Spinozan sense as that which nourishes our "capacity to relate" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 289), then we might conceive of joyful encounters as themselves possibility-making, as openings into other ways of becoming. Drawing on Deleuze, Braidotti (2011) explained that the "ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others" (p. 286), and protests are one such modality for animating new relations. Taylor, for example, talked about the creative contours of the Occupy Wall Street Movement of which he was a part, where they created "papier Mache monsters" for a parade, read books, and wrote songs and pieces of literature together, all while living in tents outside city hall. They constructed a community that was distinctly other than dominant, state-sanctioned forms of living; they not only learned together but also cared for one another and experimented with creative projects. Happe (2015), relatedly, explored what she called the "inscrutable

elements of Occupy" (p. 213) and her analysis supports Taylor's own experience in Occupy as a movement where people enacted an entirely different way of being. They "coordinate[d] and orchestrate[d] the day-to-day aspects of public, cooperative living" (Happe, 2015, p. 218) and, in large part, practiced an emergent relationality outside neoliberal and Cartesian humanist logics.

Carmen also talked joyfully about the power of protest, describing it as a spiritual, liberatory experience that opened up alternative ways of being. She noted that the first protest she planned was made possible by a vibrant community. "People were ordering pizza, bringing water," and this sense of community initiated a spiritual experience that Carmen likened to church:

> I really did feel like when we would sing…like, and your hands are up, […] you feel something within you, and I don't know what that is. But you feel it move through you. And I've only had that in protesting.

For Carmen, participating in protest was also a liberatory exercise. She said:

> Especially as a Black woman […] we're raised to stay within these constraints, we're confined in this certain type of behavior. And the way that I felt in those protests was that I was doing the exact opposite of what I'm supposed to do all the time, you know, just to like stay in order, and […] people in power were mad.

For Carmen, this collective enactment was subversive not only in relation to the protest's strategic goals to hold the university accountable for racism but also in that it enabled *another way of being* that challenged the disciplinary, ordering logic of subjugations made possible by Cartesian humanism. Carmen also reflected, "just being outside, you hear life and you're reminded that we're doing this for other people's lives." In drawing

attention to the multiple materialities that support and inspire collective action – the "material supports" that Butler (2015) wrote about – Carmen's musings express not only the spiritual and liberatory but also the *affective* and *ontological* possibilities of being, collectively, *in movement*. To care for such dynamic relations as a radical practice of imagining and living otherwise is to, as Braidotti (2011) wrote, "put the active back into activism, introducing movement, process, becoming" (p. 288).

Footnotes for Our Futures

The tensions and stuck places in organizing that neoliberalism and Cartesian humanism enable – from lack of support to frustration with overwork and encounters with racism that I explored in chapter three – are neither final nor are they individual productions. What I've suggested in this chapter is that neoliberalism and the precarities it induces rely on a particular description of the human as a rational, individual self. In this ontology, self-care can emerge as a feasible solution for stresses in organizing. But if we lived a relational, emergent ontology, might we view the responsibility for care more expansively? Might different concepts with collectivist referents populate our discourse and reorient our thinking and living? I believe it is possible to practice organizing in a relational, emergent way *even as* Cartesian humanism structures so many parts of our material-discursive world. One of Cartesian humanism's projects is to simplify ambiguity and institute hierarchies as a mode of congealing power and circumscribing the realm of possibility. Yet, ambiguity still exists and Cartesian humanism is not totalizing. One such route for navigating this ambiguity and opening the "as-yet-unthought" (Manning, 2016, p. 7) possibilities for being together, I believe, is through drawing on concepts that focus our attention on the entanglements of which we are a part. *Care for the relation*, then,

might be one such reorientation in thought that prompts us to attend to care infrastructure, to the differing needs and available contributions of, as Andres said, “all these things around,” and to dislodge from an ordering and hierarchizing logic that constrains movement and adaptability. This reorientation is a small shift that might support us in finding spaces to exercise the prefigurative project of *living* in the world as we wish it to be and in caring for our entangled pasts-presents-futures in all their capaciousness. “Striped dolphins eat fish with luminous organs that live in the deep scattering layer of the sea. What nourishes them is literally what lights them up inside! Could we be like that?” (Gumbs, 2020, p. 56). Could we, too, nourish our collective capacities for ecstatic, expansive organizing?

CHAPTER 5

BREAKING SPELLS AND FORGING NEW ALLIANCES

I arrive here, the "end" of this writing, with welling eyes, and I'm not sure whether it's because I am utterly tired or because I am confronted with the irretrievably inadequate scope of this project in relation to the problems we face. Am I supposed to have changed, am I wiser now, was this the therapeutic exercise I needed to recover from having been so harmed by an unsustainable organizing culture? And more importantly, what possibilities has this inquiry opened up, what alliances has it forged? I have strived to enter into the discursive record a sort of discursive-ontological nexus capable of accounting for how logics like neoliberalism can colonize our organizing efforts by way of concepts – specifically burnout and self-care – that become vectors for an entire Cartesian ontological universe shot through with constitutive exclusions.

This dissertation was motivated by my own background in community organizing settings and the pervasive problem of justice-oriented organizing efforts perpetuating the same logics of subjugation they struggle to abolish. In this dissertation, I theorized burnout and individualist care discourse as neoliberalized discourses enabled by Cartesian ontology. Drawing on conversations with organizers whose work spans multiple justice-oriented issues (i.e., social justice, labor justice, immigrants' rights), I argued for a *relational, emergent ontology* as a modality through which to infuse community organizing settings with new "conceptual life" (Cooper, 2014). Specifically, I offered *care for the relation* as a way of caring that is responsive to our entangled

becomings. I considered the relational, emergent *micro-utopic practices* that organizers have already engaged to show that neither neoliberalism nor Cartesian ontology is totalizing and that community organizing can be one such site for subversive ways of being. To enact in our organizing settings the type of world(s) many organizers struggle to create is "a matter of breaking something of a spellbinding order" (Pignarre & Stengers, 2011, p. 4), a visionary practice that demands we take a closer look at our complicities, exclusions, and ever-emergent affinities.

In chapter one, I introduced my own background in community organizing and reviewed scholarly and popular media treatments of activist burnout, noting the tendency toward self-care solutions and its associated limitations. In chapter two, I positioned this research as a community organizing effort informed by post qualitative and scholar activist principles and detailed my approach to inquiry. In chapter three, I analyzed burnout and individualized- and self-care as discursive deputies for neoliberalism, showing how they elevate the individual as the source of and solution to a range of sociopolitical, material-discursive harms with the effect of moderating transformative community organizing efforts. In chapter four, I considered neoliberal rationality's co-optation of burnout and care discourses as *ontological problems* made possible by Cartesian ontology and posited a relational, emergent ontology as an entryway into nurturing more just, sustainable, organizing relations. In this chapter, I meditate on the significance and implications of this project for activist burnout studies and community organizers and offer a set of possibilities for future inquiry.

Implications for Activist Burnout Studies

By bringing an ontological analysis to burnout and self-care, I showed how even some of the concepts that circulate in progressive organizing spaces are antagonistic toward the collectivist ethos to which many organizing efforts subscribe. The existing activist burnout studies literature is largely informed by psychology and sociology, and none of the literature I found situates the notions of "burnout" and "self-care" in particular discursive universes or descriptions of the human. While this body of work does attend to activists' personal accounts of burnout and their care and coping strategies and while there is a growing body of work advocating for collective care as opposed to self-care, positioning burnout and self-care within a broader neoliberal discursive repertoire is useful for highlighting the type of world these concepts maintain: namely, one that is invested in the rational and resourceful individual subject. This project troubles, extends, and contributes to the activist burnout studies literature in two primary ways: (1) by positioning the concepts of burnout and self-care in neoliberal discourse, I showed how these concepts reinscribe a particular individualist subject that forecloses possibilities for thought and action, and (2) through situating this discourse within Cartesian humanism, I challenged the innocence of these concepts and invested ontology with a foundational animacy through which entire worlds can be imagined, constructed, and lived.

Discursive (Im)possibilities

Through bringing discursive analysis to activist burnout studies, my hope is to activate lines of inquiry that trace the discursive contours of other popular concepts in organizing (i.e., community, restorative justice, protest, etc.), not necessarily to

recommend a dismissal of such concepts but rather to draw attention to their onto-epistemological investments so we might deepen our attunement to their foreclosures and complicities. Discourse enables an attention to concepts as performative and productive and, as such, is one avenue for illuminating how we can inadvertently perpetuate unjust relations in communities organized to challenge injustice. Highlighting the limitations of self-care, for example, has allowed me to probe how and why it is that we so easily offer it as a solution to problems in organizing that are never wholly individual. Importantly, one learning I've come to over the course of this dissertation is that neoliberal discourse effectively verifies the individual as the most trusted source for problem-solving or harm prevention. I've also come to see how neoliberal discourse camouflages its operative logics by co-opting the language of radicalism and social justice and infusing it with new meaning (Fraser, 2009; Hong, 2015; James, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014). As I wrote in chapter three, this is the case, as well, with self-care, which has been disarticulated from its communal, Black feminist origins and attached to gritty coping and consumerism. This dissertation is one contribution to denaturalizing taken-for-granted concepts that populate organizing spaces with the hope that we might (re)claim old or create new collective notions of what it means to engage in and sustain political action that approximate the complexity of the entanglements of which we're always already a part.

Being/Becoming in Movement Together

By rethinking burnout and care from a relational, emergent ontological approach, I have identified ontology as a possibility-making force that circumscribes the realm of what is possible for thought and action. As such, a relational, emergent ontology opens up another set of considerations for ways of being that Cartesian humanism either

pathologizes or cannot accommodate. When we no longer take the individual self as the unit of analysis and when being is rethought as a non-linear, ongoing process of *becoming*, then the questions and concepts animating our work shift. For example, in a relational, emergent ontology, "self-care" is not a feasible solution because the ontological unit is the entanglement, demanding an attunement to the complexity and diversity of the relations that constitute "us." The responsibility for care, then, becomes a necessary consideration for all the relations that enable our institutions, networks, and communities. Instead of applying economic logic across all areas of social life – as neoliberal discourse does – a relational, emergent ontology calls for a care-ful responsibility across all areas of life. To be *in movement* together, then, is to be responsive to and nurturing of the possibility to keep going without settling into dogmatic rigidities that construct and calcify hierarchies out of difference. Ahmed (2017) wrote, "[t]here is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just. We have to hesitate, to temper the strength of our tendencies with doubt; to waver when we are sure, or even because we are sure" (p. 7). This does not mean that we can never engage politically with confidence; instead, it suggests that whole other worlds, entire universes of political possibility open up when we are curious about other and different ways for emerging together and situate this curiosity as a core feature of the organizing work.

Implications for Community Organizers

The lines of inquiry I've explored in this dissertation are significant in that they aim to shift the responsibility for care and support from the individual organizer to a broader network. As such, I invite fellow organizers and organizations to consider how we might elevate *care for the relation* not as ancillary to the work but as part of the work

itself. This notion of centering care in political work follows a long line of disabled and Women of Color healing justice thinkers who grappled with a similar question: How to prioritize and nurture the relationships that make the work possible, especially in the face of multiple systems of subjugation that harm and erode communities? For Piepzna-Samarasinha (2016):

> healing justice is not a spa vacation where we recover from organizing and throw ourselves back to the grind. To me, it means a fundamental—and anti-ableist—shift in how we think of movement work—to think of it as a place where many pauses, where building in healing as well as space for grief and trauma to be held, makes the movements more flexible and longer lasting.

I view this dissertation as building on this legacy that questions the very meaning and purpose of organizing, daring to suggest new contours for the work that align with the possibility of more just, communal worlds. I posited *care for the relation* as one such conceptual tool for the imaginative project of rethinking how we navigate, respond to, and dislodge from tensions and stuck places in organizing so we can carry on with the urgent and iterative task of exposing the cracks from which "tender shoots of grass" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 73) might emerge.

In my conversations with organizers, we discussed a host of tensions and challenges that have emerged in our work that have felt stultifying, frustrating, and discouraging. We also talked about the relational supports that have and would nourish us, and these insights inspired the resources included in Appendix A. As I outlined in chapter three, common challenges included trouble building capacity, racism from colleagues, individualized care work, and difficulty recruiting volunteers. Together, we

brainstormed a host of avenues for moving through stuck places and creating more caring, sustainable organizing infrastructures. In Appendix A, I've included the kinds of educational materials the group said would be most useful: two sets of social media graphics I designed (one naming the stuck places organizers identified and the other offering considerations for more sustainable organizing efforts) as well as a handbook that offers considerations for sustainable organizing and a set of questions for organizers and organizations to consider. The considerations – from relational organizing to collective learning – encourage an attunement to and care for the multiple relations that comprise the work. As I mentioned in the preamble to the handbook, these are not prescriptions; instead, they are localized recommendations informed by my conversations with the nine organizers and my own community organizing encounters. The handbook is a working document designed specifically for the organizers who participated in this project and serves as just one gesture of gratitude and accountability to the community who made this dissertation possible. The handbook is also an invitation to an ongoing conversation about how we might be better prepared to name and dislodge from the powerful tendency to replicate logics of subjugation – like neoliberalism, racism, and sexism – in our progressive organizing settings.

This dissertation also offers a glimmer of hope about the viability of aligning our practices in organizing settings with the world(s) we desire. How might we more closely approximate the ethico-political futures we strive to make possible through our organizing *in* our organizing processes and practices themselves? If this were an animating question for our work, I'd venture we might do things differently, from how we design our meetings and organizations to the quantity and focus of our campaigns,

some possibilities I explore in the handbook. This question demands we hone our capacity to collectively recognize and name the harmful discourses that might be circulating in our organizing efforts, a learning that organizing settings are uniquely poised to undertake.

Learning communities have long been a core feature of social movement organizing, taking the form of reading groups, forums, teach-ins, workshops, and more (brown, 2017; Choudry, 2015; Holst, 2002). Learning is, in fact, inevitable in organizing, as knowledge is continuously produced and shared at marches, protests, meetings, and those multiple informal moments of togetherness when conversation happens (Choudry, 2015). For example, movement centers emerged during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s as one way to organize the learning process and offer spaces for activists to develop strategies and tactics while building community (Morris, 2003). The Highlander Center has also played a central role in educating for collective change, serving as a hub for leadership development and movement capacity-building in the United States since the 1930s (Horton & Freire, 1990). And an increasing number of organizations – like LeftRoots, for example, a national Women-of-Color-led Socialist organization based in California (Day, 2019) – are making public their vision and strategy documents and positioning themselves as support networks for grassroots organizing, helping to democratize access and build capacity across emerging movements. It is in light of this context that adult educator, organizer, and historian of social movements Choudry (2015) observed that "[i]t should not be a radical idea to acknowledge that ordinary people can think and theorize as they act collectively" (p. 2). Organizers and the communities in which they're embedded, then, are always already in the process of theory-building and

knowledge-making. To shape our learning communities in organizing settings to attend not only to pressing problems happening "out" in the world but also to how these injustices may be colonizing our own work and organizing relations seems like a crucial line of inquiry. It can support new alliances and micro-utopic ways of being that, if they gain enough traction, have the power to render unfeasible the multiple logics of subjugation we are up against. As such, I am motivated by the promise of this project to serve as one source of inspiration for community organizers to collectively grapple with how to, as abolitionist organizer Amanda Aguilar Shank wrote, "align the ways we relate to each other with our values" (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020, p. 27).

Constellations for Future Inquiry

This project, like all inquiry, is only a partial doing that points to other avenues for future scholarship, including those we might yet be unable to think. I am inspired by possibilities for exploring how teaching and learning happens in organizing settings, particularly noting what discourses and ontologies are at work in their internal and outreach-focused educational materials, processes, and events. This project also invites further inquiry on micro-utopic organizing spaces, or what Cooper (2014) called "everyday utopias," with particular attention to the material-discursive supports that sustain these spaces. I imagine, also, that organizers who do work on a national or international scale – or those differently geographically or otherwise situated, or those hyper-focused on one particular issue – might have very different musings about their struggles with or dreams for sustainability. Explorations along these lines of difference will likely produce new and different insights.

"I Pledge Allegiance to the Always Not Yet"[6]

Through this philosophical, community-based experiment in thought, I have strived to sketch the neoliberal contours of burnout and self-care discourses in community organizing and highlight ontology as one site through which to stage a powerful reworking of political possibility. In situating ontology as a core feature of this critique, I aimed to show that Cartesian humanism and its dualistic conceptual supports enable harmful logics like neoliberalism in the first place. As such, I took up *burnout* and *self-care* as concepts rooted in a particular individualist, Cartesian ontology that emphasizes the unitary subject and so enables a range of individualist interventions. In offering relational, emergent ontologies as an avenue through which to imagine more communal, sustainable organizing efforts, I've suggested that the logics of subjugation that paradoxically circulate in our justice-oriented organizing settings are neither natural nor totalizing. Instead, community organizing is a particularly promising site through which to be/live/organize "outside the taxonomies that swirl around us" (McKittrick, 2021, p. 34) such that we grow *more* capable of enacting sustainable alternatives. By engaging with the possibilities for relational, emergent micro-utopic practices, we might more collaboratively and sustainably perform "the stubborn labour of operationalizing critical spaces within, beneath and beyond the present – as the record of both what we are ceasing to be and what we are in the process of becoming" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 49).

[6] I borrow this beautiful title from Zaina Alsous. Alsous, Z. (2018, February 8). I pledge allegiance to the always not yet. *Scalawag Magazine*. https://scalawagmagazine.org/2018/02/i-pledge-allegiance-to-the-always-not-yet/

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APPENDIX A

RESOURCES FOR ORGANIZERS

MEDITATIONS ON BUILDING HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZING COMMUNITIES

PREAMBLE

This handbook is a labor of love. It is an invitation to get curious about how we might organize for better futures in a more just, collaborative, and sustainable way.

Too often, organizers and activists engaged in social justice and liberation work disengage, or organizations and social change efforts fall apart too soon. We can grow overwhelmed by a culture of conflict, overwork, and selflessness wherein activists and organizers are expected to resign everything to accommodate the urgency of the injustices we face. The interlocking systems of oppression we're up against – white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and more – enable and intensify these kinds of individualist, unsustainable organizing cultures. In other words, our progressive community organizing and political advocacy settings are not immune from reproducing the same oppressions we're trying to dismantle.

Our current times – characterized by a global pandemic, anti-Black and anti-Asian violence, white supremacist threats to democracy, climate disaster, and growing economic precarity across the globe – call for increased attention to how we might build and sustain organized progressive power through and outside neoliberal capitalism in favor of life-affirming political, economic, ethical, and social alternatives. These times also demand a renewed politics of possibility, an imaginative politics that invites us to dream how we might construct our collective future(s) otherwise. Community organizing settings have long been promising sites for this dual project of resisting systemic oppressions and building equitable alternatives. So it's crucial that we nourish this work, which includes asking hard questions about how oppressive logics may be colonizing our organizing settings and committing to relating to one another and to the work in a way that models the world(s) we struggle to create. "We have a responsibility to align the ways we relate to each other with our values – from the most intimate relationship up to larger systems like the criminal and immigration systems," said abolitionist organizer Amanda Aguilar Shank. What does it look like to unapologetically align our practice in our organizing lives with our values? What supports are necessary to make that possible? And what political possibilities might emerge when we shift the responsibility for care and support from the individual organizer themselves to a broader collectivity? It's a concerted striving toward this alignment that inspired this handbook.

PREAMBLE cont.

This handbook weaves together meditations on collectively building more healthy and sustainable community organizing efforts informed by one-on-one and group conversations with nine organizers whose identities vary along lines of race, gender, age, nationality, language, and class. Some currently serve as elected officials with organizing backgrounds, some are veteran organizers, some are taking a break from organizing after periods of hyper-engagement, and some consider themselves new to organizing. Their work has focused on issues ranging from social and economic justice and immigrant rights to racial justice and education advocacy in nonprofit, governmental, and grassroots settings. They've planned actions, organized marches, lobbied for policy change, ran for (and won!) public office, recruited and trained volunteers, developed candidates, managed campaigns, hosted workshops, coordinated festivals, and more. Because this handbook is part of a larger research project, I've assigned pseudonyms to those organizers to support confidentiality. Together, we talked about turning points in our organizing, times when we've felt frustrated or stuck, the supports that nourish us, and what we really need to optimally thrive in our work. Their wisdom gives life to the following pages.

Our hope is that this handbook is just a starting place, one contribution to an evolving conversation about care and sustainability in community organizing. We invite you to discuss the contents in your own advocacy settings, offer updates and revisions, share with your networks, and personalize the considerations to your own work.

with love, in solidarity,

briana bivens

ORGANIZER/EDUCATION RESEARCHER,
ATHENS, GA

MENTORSHIP

THE NEED

Political and organizing mentors can be hard to come by, leaving some newer organizers feeling as though they have to start from scratch or invent everything as they go along with little support from veteran organizer-elders. But mentoring others can be a challenge for veteran or hyper-engaged organizers given the many competing demands on their time and the un- and underpaid nature of the work.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- Are there opportunities to take some projects off your/your organization's plate to create dedicated time to deepen relationships and share knowledge?
- Might you/your organization map your questions and needs and seek out insights or resources that already exist within the organization?
- Are there organizer-elders who can serve as mentors for newer activists or organizers? And how can you support both groups?

> *The kind of space that I think I need to be in is one where the people who have the resources, who have the time, who have the capacity, like older people who also have the politics and can then groom the younger people who don't necessarily have the capacity that older people do.*
>
> Carmen, racial and labor justice organizer

CAPACITY-BUILDING

THE NEED

Given the scope and seriousness of the problems facing our communities and our globe, it can feel indulgent or ancillary to take time away from particular project-based tasks (all of which always feel so urgent!) to recruit and build a team. We know that base-building -- increasing capacity through outreach and political education -- is crucial for our ability to sustain the work and prevent individual overwork, resentment, or burnout.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- How do you recruit, build trust, and form community with new volunteers?
- Do you offer a variety of engagement opportunities tailored to different interests, skills, and availability?
- What does your political education or onboarding process look like to ensure volunteers are equipped with the information they need?

> *So recruiting volunteers is tough, and hanging on to volunteers, and finding people who will actually do what they say is tough because people are not getting paid for this usually.*
>
> Anna, candidate development organizer

CREATIVITY

THE NEED

Encouraging creativity in our strategies, tactics, and modes of organizing can help inspire organizers and volunteers, disrupt well-worn routines, and invite new political possibilities. adrienne maree brown (2017) convincingly noted, "I suspect that to really transform our society, we will need to make justice one of the most pleasurable experiences we can have" (p. 33).

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- Are there ways you/your organization can diversify your outreach, protest, and engagement efforts by incorporating art and music? Are there local artists who will design a coloring book for your organization or issue campaign, for example?
- How can you disrupt the conventional meeting format and incorporate music or content that sparks joy, laughter, and connection?

> That was fun, we were dancing. But at the same time we were pushing people across the street to the poll. My theme song for the whole election is James Brown. The Big Payback. That's my song. That's what we played at the block. And at the same time I think we impacted the people going to the poll.
>
> Harriett, economic justice + civic engagement organizer

CELEBRATION

THE NEED

Celebrating each other and the magic our collaboration can create can be transformative. When we take the time to cultivate moments for joy and acknowledgment, we are refusing the capitalist notion that our value as organizers is tied to production and output. Also, a culture of celebration and appreciation helps demystify organizing by drawing attention to all the moving parts that enable this work and addressing any inequities in role distribution that may exist.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- Do you/your organization have a weekly (or monthly) gratitude practice (in a meeting, in a social media post, through email, etc.)? This can be one way to honor people's various contributions to the organizing that week or month.
- Is there space to celebrate together? Whether it's through an annual community festival, an organizational birthday or anniversary celebration, or a potluck for organizers and volunteers, these can be spaces for people to get to know one another, build trust, and be in joyful community.

I remember the first time we had a big victory with putting Sunday buses in place. I snuck into our next Board meeting a bottle of champagne and hid it behind my chair. So when it came to that part, we popped the cork and all drank champagne together because we needed to celebrate these victories and how this was because of everybody working together.

Taylor, organizer and local elected official

CARE INFRASTRUCTURE

THE NEED

Organizing spaces are unfortunately not immune from perpetuating injustice. An inattention to the quality of the *relations* in organizing settings in the name of urgency and self-sacrifice can create a significant amount of emotional labor and care work, which tends to fall on women and People of Color. Also, the absence of established time, commitments, or processes for collective care in organizing spaces problematically elevates "self-care" as the solution to problems organizers face that are never entirely individual.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- Do you have clear commitments and processes for how your organization approaches conflict that might arise among organizers?
- Can you provide child care at meetings for people who need it (and compensate the caregiver)?
- Can you provide food and drink at in-person meetings/gatherings?
- Can you offer virtual and in-person participation options?
- How accessible are your meetings, events, and communication platforms?

> *Just like, hundreds of hours stocked into reading through Facebook posts and replying to things and then going into private messaging and being like, "Are you okay?" You know, "You seem pretty upset." So just a lot of soothing ruffled feathers or trying to figure out where people stood on certain issues or trying to do conflict mediation.*
>
> Lydia, social and economic justice organizer and artist

HEALING JUSTICE

THE NEED

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha described the healing justice movement as emerging in response to "burnout, ableist movement cultures that denigrate and dismiss healing as not serious, a lack of access to high-quality healing and health care by oppressed people—as well as in the hopes of reclaiming the ways our oppressed, surviving communities have always healed, from before colonization to now." In other words, healing justice centers care and healing not as tangential to organizing but as an integral part of liberation struggles.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- What opportunities are there for organizers to speak their needs and check-in about how they're doing so we can honor each other as whole people beyond our roles as organizers?
- What healing and collective care resources exist in your community? (i.e., somatics, meditation, mutual aid)What might your organization be able to do to facilitate access to these resources for organizers/colleagues/volunteers? How
- might you embed restorative/healing circles into your retreat or gathering settings?

We keep each other's spirits up and we've felt like we're our political family [...]

Outside of the organizing work we always end up talking. It doesn't have to always be about the work. So we've had those moments of healing too.

Cristina, immigrant rights + liberation organizer

HEALTHY PACING

THE NEED

Organizers and activists often cite a sense of urgency or culture of shame around boundary-setting that makes it difficult to construct boundaries around our time, our capacity, and our interests and needs outside of organizing. This can create challenges for volunteer recruitment and sustainability, as well. The scope and intensity of the social and political ills our world faces are vast, yet, when we replicate the neoliberal capitalist logics of efficiency, speed, and productivity in our organizing spaces, we risk the sustainability of our crucial work.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- At the start of each year, quarter, or project, can you map the core goals and tasks according to the actually existing capacity and interests of the people who will be participating?
- In that map, might you build in time for unexpected demands on time, celebration, rest, co-learning, reflection, and assessment?
- Can you clarify expected tasks associated with a project so volunteers can make informed decisions about their capacity to contribute?

I felt like there was a requirement to have a personality that meant that I move very quickly. I had to sacrifice my other interests, and I had to devote everything to this cause all day, every day. Need to be in the messages, need to reply, need to be available, and if I'm not, it's a testament to my commitment.

Carmen, labor and racial justice organizer

**

I think once you get so deep into organizing, there's no time. If you're in a role, you're going from one thing to the next. And you know, most people have jobs so I try to be purposeful. I try to do a lot of reflecting.

Jasmine, education organizer and local elected official

COLLECTIVE LEARNING

THE NEED

There is a rich history of people learning together outside of formal educational settings to make a change that the traditional education system does not typically address (i.e., Freedom Schools; Highlander Folk School). The tradition of workshops and teach-ins that many organizations and social movements practice today are just a few examples of the ways that organizers have deepened and archived their learning to contribute to the longevity of transformative change. This co-learning is one way to build trust and community while enriching the possibility for sustainable, intergenerational action.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- Might you embed learning opportunities in regularly-scheduled events or meetings? (i.e., reading an excerpt from a book, incorporating a teach-in, inviting unstructured time to discuss a particular concept, mapping community knowledges)
- Are there avenues to deepen investment in coalition-building? (i.e., sharing/swapping resources with regional, national, or global orgs, attending trainings, etc.)
- Could you benefit from establishing an archivist position or process to creatively document and organize your work?

> *I believe that we have a kinda knowledge. In the school we learn things, and they teach us some things, but in our house our parents, our siblings, they teach us other things. And those things are with us all the time. And for many generations we pass on a kind of knowledge which is not in writing...it's deep in our DNA. And I think that is where our humanity resides.*
>
> Andres, immigrant rights and liberation organizer

RELATIONAL ORGANIZING

THE NEED

Too many organizing communities are plagued by competition, "rigid radicalism" (Montgomery & bergman, 2017), and shame and blame cultures that tear us apart rather than highlight our interdependencies. Relational organizing is an approach anchored in trust, accountability, and mutual care. It is a mode of letting emergent connection guide our work. It also considers caring for the relations that make the work possible *as part of* the work itself. In this way, it reflects a commitment to the micro-utopic possibility of practicing in our organizing settings the world(s) we're struggling to create.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- Is there space for or a need to analyze with your fellow organizers/colleagues/co-conspirators how your organization might be perpetuating an individualist culture? Ways you might be practicing relationship-based organizing already, and room for growth?
- How do the needs and strengths of the communities most harmed by systems of oppression guide your work?
- Are there ways to democratize and make your decision-making processes more accessible?

Our collaboration has grown out of our friendship first, and that is a real collaboration.

V, local elected official

**

They made their own power and then were like, "holy shit, look what I did and look what I can do!" and to me that's maybe the most amazing thing that human beings can do outside of loving each other.

Taylor, social + economic justice organizer and local elected official

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books on Organizing and Capacity-Building

-*Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown (2017)

-*Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* by Nick Montgomery and carla bergman (2017)

-*Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* by adrienne maree brown (2019)

-*Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* by Charlene A. Carruthers (2018)

-*Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* by alexis pauline gumbs (2020)

-*We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice* by Mariame Kaba (2021)

Care and Healing

-*Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* by Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (Eds.) (2020) [book]

-*Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) [book]

-*The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* by Sonya Renee Taylor (2018) [book]

-*The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* by The Care Collective (2020) [book]

-*The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism, and Engage in Collective Healing* by Anneliese A. Singh (2019) [book]

-Black Lives Matter: Healing in Action Toolkit (https://blacklivesmatter.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/BLM_HealinginAction-1-1.pdf)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

-“A Not-So-Brief Personal History of the Healing Justice Movement, 2010-2016” by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (https://micemagazine.ca/issue-two/not-so-brief-personal-history-healing-justice-movement-2010–2016)

-“Healing Justice Practice Spaces: A How-To Guide” (2014, December 18) (https://justhealing.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/healing-justice-practice-spaces-a-how-to-guide-with-links.pdf)

--“The Elements of Creating Collective Space” by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SONG-Alchemy-The-Elements-of-Creating-Collective-Space.pdf) [handout]

-Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective (http://kindredsouthernhjcollective.org)

-Sins Invalid (https://www.sinsinvalid.org/mission)

-Leaving Evidence by Mia Mingus (https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2/) [blog]

-Pods and Pod Mapping by Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (https://batjc.wordpress.com/resources/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/) [handout]

Art and Creativity in Organizing

-“Color Out Cash Bail” coloring book by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/member-initiated-project-virginia-color-our-cash-bail-coloring-book/) [coloring book]

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Relational Organizing

-"The Intersectional Community Map" by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SONG-The-Intersectional-Community-Map-Land-Body-Work-Spirit1.pdf) [activity]

-"The Elements of Creating Collective Space" by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SONG-Alchemy-The-Elements-of-Creating-Collective-Space.pdf) [handout]

-"Relational Organizing" by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/SONG-Relational-Organizing.pdf) [handout]

-"Relational Organizing in an Electoral Context" by Acronym (2018, June 4) (https://medium.com/@anotheracronym/relational-organizing-in-an-electoral-context-6293042cd0f9) [article]

-"Mapping Our Futures: Economics and Governance Curriculum by Highlander Research and Education Center (https://highlandercenter.org/our-impact/economics-governance/) [curriculum]

MEDITACIONES SOBRE CONSTRUIR COMUNIDADES ORGANIZADORAS SALUDABLES Y SOSTENIBLES

PREÁMBULO

Este manual es una obra de amor. Es una invitación a ponernos curiosos sobre cómo podríamos organizarnos para futuros mejores de una manera más justa, colaborativa y sostenible.

Con demasiada frecuencia, los organizadores y activistas que trabajamos para la liberación y la justicia social nos desvinculamos o las organizaciones y los esfuerzos de cambio social se derrumban demasiado pronto. Nos podemos agobiar con una cultura de conflicto, trabajo excesivo y abnegación en la que se nos espera sacrificar todo para acomodar la urgencia de las injusticias a las que nos enfrentamos. Los sistemas conectados de opresión que enfrentamos - la supremacía blanca, el patriarcado, el capitalismo y más - posibilitan e intensifican estos tipos de culturas organizativas individualistas e insostenibles. En otras palabras, nuestros espacios de organización comunitaria progresista y abogacía políticas no son exentos de reproducir las mismas opresiones que intentamos desmontar.

La actualidad - caracterizada por una pandemia global; violencia anti-Negro y anti-Asiático; amenazas de la supremacía blanca contra la democracia; el desastre climático; y la precariedad económica en aumento mundialmente - exige una mayor atención a cómo podríamos construir y sostener el poder progresista organizado a través de y afuera del capitalismo neoliberal para alternativas políticas, económicas, éticas y sociales que revalidan la vida. La actualidad también exige una renovada política de la posibilidad, una política imaginativa que nos invita a soñar cómo podemos construir nuestros futuros colectivos de otra manera. Los espacios de organización comunitaria han sido sitios prometedores para este proyecto doble de resistir las opresiones sistémicas y construir alternativas equitativas. Así que es esencial que nutrimos este trabajo, lo que incluye hacer preguntas difíciles sobre cómo las lógicas opresivas podrían estar colonizando nuestros espacios organizativos y comprometernos con relacionarnos y trabajar de maneras que modelan el/los mundo(s) que luchamos para crear. “Tenemos la responsabilidad de alinear nuestra manera de relacionarnos con nuestros valores - desde la relación más íntima hasta los sistemas más grandes como el criminal y el de inmigración'', dijo la organizadora abolicionista Amanda Aguilar Shank. ¿Cómo se ve el alinear sin disculpas nuestra práctica en nuestras vidas organizativas con nuestros valores? ¿Qué apoyos hacen falta para hacer posible eso? ¿Y qué posibilidades políticas podrían aparecer cuando trasladamos la responsabilidad de cuidados y apoyos del organizador individual a la colectividad? Es un esfuerzo dedicado hacia este alineamiento que inspiró este manual.

PREÁMBULO cont.

Este manual teje meditaciones sobre construir colectivamente esfuerzos de organización comunitaria más saludables y sostenibles, informadas por conversaciones individuales y en grupo con nueve organizadores cuyas identidades varían según raza, género, edad, nacionalidad, idioma y clase social. Algunos sirven actualmente como oficiales elegidos con experiencia como organizadores, algunos son organizadores veteranos, algunos están tomándose un descanso de organizar después de períodos de hypercompromiso y algunos se consideran nuevos en la organización comunitaria. Su trabajo se ha enfocado en temas desde la justicia social y económica y los derechos de los inmigrantes hasta la justicia racial y la defensoría educativa en los espacios de apoyo comunitario, de organizaciones sin fines de lucro y desde el gobierno. Han planificado acciones, han organizado marchas, han presionado para cambiar políticas, han sido candidatos (¡y han ganado!), han reclutado y entrenado a voluntarios, han desarrollado a candidatos, han dirigido campañas, han sido anfitriones de talleres, han coordinado festivales y más. Dado que este manual es parte de un proyecto de investigación más amplio, les he dado seudónimos para la confidencialidad. Juntos hablamos sobre los puntos de inflexión en nuestro trabajo de organización; las veces que nos hemos frustrado o atascado; los apoyos que nos nutren; y lo que de verdad necesitamos para hacer lo mejor en nuestro trabajo. Su sabiduría da vida a las siguientes páginas.

Nuestra esperanza es que este manual sea nada más un punto de partida, una sola contribución a una conversacion en evolución sobre los cuidados y la sostenibilidad en la organización comunitaria. Te invitamos a hablar sobre los contenidos en tus propios espacios de organización, a ofrecer actualizaciones y revisiones, a compartir con tus redes y a personalizar las consideraciones para tu propio trabajo.

Con amor, en solidaridad,

briana bivens

ORGANIZADORA/INVESTIGADOR EN EDUCACIÓN, ATHENS, GA

MENTORÍA

LA NECESIDAD

Los mentores políticos y de organización pueden ser difíciles de encontrar, con el resultado de que algunos organizadores nuevos se sienten como si tuvieran que empezar de cero o inventar todo por el camino con poco apoyo de organizadores experimentados. Aconsejar a los demás también es un desafío para algunos organizadores por la falta de tiempo y el carácter mal pagado o no pagado del trabajo.

PREGUNTAS PARA PONDERAR

- ¿Existen oportunidades para quitar algunos proyectos de la agenda de tu organización para crear tiempo dedicado para profundizar relaciones y compartir conocimientos?
- ¿Podría tu organización mapear sus preguntas y necesidades para buscar recursos o ideas que ya existen en la organización?
- ¿Hay organizadores veteranos que pueden servir como mentores para activistas y organizadores menos experimentados?

> *El tipo de espacio que creo que necesito es uno en el que la gente que tenga los recursos, que tenga el tiempo, que tenga la capacidad, como unas personas mayores que también tengan las ideas políticas y que puedan guiar a los jóvenes que quizás no tengan la capacidad que tienen los mayores.*
>
> Carmen, organizadora de justicia racial y laboral

CONSTRUIR CAPACIDAD

LA NECESIDAD

Dados el alcance y la seriedad de los problemas de nuestras comunidades y el mundo, puede parecer una distracción quitarles tiempo del trabajo directo de proyectos particulares (¡todos de los que siempre se sienten tan urgentes!) para reclutar y montar un equipo. Sin embargo, sabemos que desarrollar una base fuerte -- aumentar la capacidad a través del contacto con la comunidad y la educación política -- es crucial para nuestra capacidad de sostener el trabajo y prevenir el trabajo excesivo, el resentimiento o el agotamiento individuales.

PREGUNTAS PARA PONDERAR

- ¿Cómo se recluta, se construye confianza y se forma comunidad con los nuevos voluntarios?
- ¿Se ofrece una variedad de oportunidades para aportar a personas con intereses, destrezas y disponibilidad distintos?
- ¿Cómo se ve su proceso de incorporación y educación política para asegurar que nuevos voluntarios tengan la información que necesitan?

Pues, reclutar voluntarios es difícil, y conservar voluntarios, y encontrar a gente que de verdad haga lo que dice es difícil porque no se paga por esto normalmente.

Anna, organizadora de desarrollo de candidatos

LA CREATIVIDAD

LA NECESIDAD

Fomentar la creatividad en nuestras estrategias, nuestras tácticas y nuestros modos de organización puede ayudar a inspirar a los organizadores y a los voluntarios, interrumpir rutinas desgastadas e invitar nuevas posibilidades políticas. Adrienne marie brown (2017) notó de una manera convincente, “sospecho que para transformar de verdad nuestra sociedad, tendremos que hacer de la justicia una de las experiencias más placenteras que hay” (p. 33).

PREGUNTAS PARA PONDERAR

- ¿Hay maneras en las que tu organización puede diversificar sus esfuerzos de contacto, protesta e integración a la comunidad incorporando al arte y la música? ¿Hay artistas locales que diseñarían un libro para colorear para tu organización o campaña, por ejemplo?
- ¿Cómo puede interrumpir el formato de reunión convencional e incorporar música o contenido que provoque alegría, risa y conexión?

Eso fue divertido, bailábamos, pero al mismo tiempo empujamos a la gente a cruzar la calle a votar. Mi canción de estas elecciones es James Brown, The Big Payback. Esa es mi canción. Es lo que pusimos en la calle. Y a la vez creo que afectamos a la gente que iba a votar.

Harriett, organizadora de justicia económica y participación cívica

LA CELEBRACIÓN

LA NECESIDAD

Celebrarnos y la magia que nuestra colaboración puede crear puede ser transformativo. Cuando tomamos el tiempo de cultivar momentos para la alegría y el agradecimiento, rechazamos la noción capitalista de que nuestro valor como organizadores esté basado en la producción. También, una cultura de celebración y aprecio ayuda a desmitificar la organización por poner un foco en todas las partes en movimiento que hacen posibles este trabajo y también en cualquier inequidad de distribución de roles que pueda existir.

PREGUNTAS PARA PONDERAR

- ¿Tiene tu organización una práctica semanal (o mensual) de agradecimiento (en una junta, un post en medios sociales, por correo electrónico, etc.)? Es una manera de honrar a las varias contribuciones de la gente a la organización durante esa semana o ese mes.
- ¿Hay espacio para celebrar juntos? Y sea un festival comunitario anual, un cumpleaños o aniversario de la organización o una cena para los organizadores y voluntarios, estos pueden ser espacios para que la gente se conozca, se construya confianza y que estemos en comunidad con alegría.

Recuerdo la primera gran victoria cuando establecimos los buses de los domingos, colé en la próxima junta de la mesa una botella de champaña y la escondí detrás de mi silla. Y cuando llegamos a esa parte, sacamos el corcho y todos tomamos juntos la champaña porque había que celebrar estas victorias y que esto fue porque todos trabajamos juntos.

Taylor, organizador y funcionario local elegido

LA INFRAESTRUCTURA DE CUIDADOS

LA NECESIDAD

Desafortunadamente los espacios de organización no están exentos de perpetuar la injusticia. Una falta de atención a la calidad de las relaciones en nombre de la urgencia y el autosacrificio puede crear una cantidad significativa de trabajo emocional y de cuidados, el que tiende a ser cargado por las mujeres y las personas de color. Además, la ausencia de tiempo dedicado, compromisos o procesos para cuidados colectivos eleva problemáticamente el "autocuidado" como la solución a los problemas de organizadores que nunca son completamente individuales.

PREGUNTAS PARA PONDERAR

- ¿Tienen compromisos y procesos claros para cómo tu organización trata el conflicto que puede aparecer entre organizadores?
- ¿Se puede proveer el cuidado de niños en las juntas para los que lo necesiten (y compensar al cuidador)?
- ¿Se puede proveer comida y bebidas durante las reuniones presenciales?
- ¿Se puede proveer opciones de participación virtuales y presenciales?
- ¿Se puede evaluar la accesibilidad de sus juntas, eventos y plataformas de comunicación?

Como que, cientos de horas usadas en leer posts de Facebook y en responder a cosas y entonces ir a los mensajes privados para decir, como, "¿Estás bien?", sabes, "pareces bien molesto." Así pues, mucho tiempo invertido en ayudar a recobrar la calma o tratar de averiguar las diferentes posturas o tratar de mediar los conflictos.

Lydia, organizadora de justicia social y económica y artista

LA JUSTICIA SANADORA

LA NECESIDAD

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha escribió que el movimiento de la justicia sanadora emergió como respuesta a “culturas de agotamiento y capacitismo en el movimiento que denigran y descartan a la sanación como algo poco seria, la falta de acceso a la asistencia médica y la sanación de alta calidad por los oprimidos -- tanto como en la esperanza de recuperar las maneras de las que nuestras comunidades oprimidas y supervivientes siempre se han sanado, desde antes de la colonización hasta hoy.” De otras palabras, la justicia sanadora pone el cuidado y la sanación, no como tangencial a la organización, sino como una parte central de las luchas de liberación.

PREGUNTAS PARA PONDERAR

- ¿Qué oportunidades hay para que los organizadores hablen de sus necesidades y den actualizaciones para que nos podamos honrar como personas enteras más allá de nuestros papeles como organizadores?
- ¿Qué recursos de sanación y cuidados colectivos existen en tu comunidad? (p.ej., la somática, la meditación, las ayudas mutuas) ¿Qué podría hacer tu organización para facilitar el acceso a estos recursos para los organizadores/compañeros/voluntarios?
- ¿Cómo se puede implementar círculos de restauración y sanación en sus espacios de retiro o reunión?

siempre estamos allí y nos damos ánimo y independientemente de eso creo que hemos sentido como que somos la familia política.

[...]

Fuera de lo que es el trabajo organizativo siempre de alguna manera siempre terminamos hablando, no tiene que ser siempre de trabajo, entonces hemos tomado esos momentos de sanación también.

Cristina, organizadora de los derechos de los migrantes

UN RITMO SALUDABLE

LA NECESIDAD

Los organizadores y activistas muchas veces citan un sentido de urgencia o una cultura de vergüenza acerca de poner límites que hace difícil construir límites en nuestro tiempo, nuestra capacidad y nuestros intereses y necesidades fuera de la organización. Esto puede crear desafíos para el reclutamiento de voluntarios y la sostenibilidad también. El alcance y la intensidad de las desgracias sociales y políticas que enfrentamos son inmensas, sin embargo, cuando replicamos las lógicas capitalistas neoliberales de eficiencia, velocidad y productividad en nuestros espacios de organización, arriesgamos la sostenibilidad de nuestro trabajo esencial.

PREGUNTAS PARA PONDERAR

- ¿Al comienzo de cada año, trimestre o proyecto, se mapea las metas y tareas principales según la capacidad real actual y el interés de los que participarán?
- ¿En ese mapa, se incluye una reserva de tiempo para la celebración, la reflexión, el descanso, el aprendizaje mutuo, la evaluación y todo lo inesperado?
- ¿Puede aclarar las tareas específicas para que los voluntarios puedan tomar decisiones informadas sobre su capacidad de participación?

Me sentía como que había un requisito a tener una personalidad que significaba que tenía que moverme muy rápido, que tenía que sacrificar mis otros intereses y que tenía que dedicar todo a esta causa todo el día, todos los días. Había que estar en los mensajes, que responder, que estar disponible, y si no, es un testimonio de mi compromiso.

Carmen, organizadora de justicia racial y laboral

**

Creo que una vez que te metes profundamente, no hay tiempo. Si tienes un rol, vas de una cosa a la otra. Y sabes, la mayor parte de la gente trabaja, así que trato de tener un propósito claro. Trato de reflexionar mucho.

Jasmine, organizadora de educación y funcionaria local elegida

EL APRENDIZAJE COLECTIVO

LA NECESIDAD

Hay una historia rica de gente que aprende juntos fuera de los espacios formales de educación para hacer cambios que el sistema tradicional de educación no tocan (p.ej., las Escuelas de Libertad; la Highlander Folk School). La tradición de talleres y clases informales que practican muchas organizaciones hoy en día son tan solo unos ejemplos de las maneras en las que los organizadores han profundizado y han archivado su aprendizaje para contribuir a la longevidad del cambio transformativo. Este aprendizaje mutuo es una manera de construir confianza y comunidad a la vez de enriquecer las posibilidades de acción sostenible e intergeneracional.

PREGUNTAS PARA PONDERAR

- ¿Se puede incluir oportunidades de aprender en los eventos o las juntas regulares? (p.ej., leer un pasaje de un libro, incorporar una clase breve, invitar tiempo no estructucturado para hablar de un concepto particular, mapear sabidurías comunitarias)
- ¿Hay caminos para profundizar la inversión en construir coaliciones? (p.ej., compartir/intercambiar recursos con organizaciones regionales, nacionales o globales, asistir entrenamientos, etc.)
- ¿Se puede beneficiar de establecer un puesto o proceso de archivista para documentar y organizar el trabajo creativamente?

Creo que tenemos un tipo de conocimiento. En la escuela aprendemos cosas y nos enseñan algunas cosas, pero en nuestra casa los padres, los hermanos, nos enseñan otras cosas. Y esas cosas siempre están con nosotros. Y por muchas generaciones pasamos un tipo de conocimiento que no está escrito...está en las profundidades de nuestro ADN. Y creo que es allí donde reside nuestra humanidad.

Andres, organizador de derechos de los migrantes

LA ORGANIZACIÓN RELACIONAL

LA NECESIDAD

Demasiadas comunidades de organización sufren de la competencia, “el radicalismo rígido” (Mongomery & bergman, 2017) y culturas de vergüenza y culpa que nos despedazan en lugar de subrayan nuestras interdependencias. La organización relational es una práctica anclada en la confianza, la responsabilidad y el cuidado mutuo. Es un modo de dejar que nos guíe la conexión emergente y de cuidar las relaciones que hacen posible el trabajo, como parte del trabajo. De esta manera, refleja un compromiso con la posibilidad micro-utópica de practicar en nuestros espacios de organización el/los mundo(s) que luchamos para crear.

PREGUNTAS PARA PONDERAR

- ¿Hay el espacio o la necesidad de analizar con tus compañeros cómo su organización podría perpetuar una cultura individualista? ¿Hay maneras de las que ya practican la organización basada en relaciones y espacio para crecer?
- ¿Cómo guían su trabajo las necesidades y las fortalezas de las comunidades más dañadas por los sistemas de opresión?
- ¿Hay maneras de democratizar y hacer más accesibles sus procesos de tomar decisiones?

Nuestra colaboración ha crecido desde la amistad y esa es una colaboración verdadera.

V, funcionaria local elegida

**

Hicieron su propio poder y luego eran como que “¡Híjole! ¡Mira lo que hice y lo que puedo hacer!” y para mí eso puede que sea lo más asombroso que podemos hacer los seres humanos más allá de querernos.

Taylor, organizador y funcionario local elegido

RECURSOS ADICIONALE

Libros Sobre Organización y Desarrollo de Capacidades

-*Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown (2017)

-*Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* by Nick Montgomery and carla bergman (2017)

-*Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* by adrienne maree brown (2019)

-*Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* by Charlene A. Carruthers (2018)

-*Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* by alexis pauline gumbs (2020)

-*We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice* by Mariame Kaba (2021)

Cuidado y Curación

-*Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* by Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (Eds.) (2020) [libro]

-*Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) [libro]
-*The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* by Sonya Renee Taylor (2018) [libro]

-*The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* by The Care Collective (2020) [libro]

-*The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism, and Engage in Collective Healing* by Anneliese A. Singh (2019) [libro]

-Black Lives Matter: Healing in Action Toolkit (https://blacklivesmatter.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/BLM_HealinginAction-1-1.pdf)

RECURSOS ADICIONALE

-“A Not-So-Brief Personal History of the Healing Justice Movement, 2010-2016” by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (https://micemagazine.ca/issue-two/not-so-brief-personal-history-healing-justice-movement-2010–2016)

-“Healing Justice Practice Spaces: A How-To Guide” (2014, December 18) (https://justhealing.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/healing-justice-practice-spaces-a-how-to-guide-with-links.pdf)

--“The Elements of Creating Collective Space” by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SONG-Alchemy-The-Elements-of-Creating-Collective-Space.pdf) [el folleto]

-Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective (http://kindredsouthernhjcollective.org)

-Sins Invalid (https://www.sinsinvalid.org/mission)

-Leaving Evidence by Mia Mingus (https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2/) [blog]

-Pods and Pod Mapping by Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (https://batjc.wordpress.com/resources/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/) [el folleto]

Arte de Creatividad en la Organización

-“Color Out Cash Bail” coloring book by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/member-initiated-project-virginia-color-our-cash-bail-coloring-book/) [libro de colorear]

RECURSOS ADICIONALE

Organización Relacional

-“The Intersectional Community Map” by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SONG-The-Intersectional-Community-Map-Land-Body-Work-Spirit1.pdf) [actividad]

-“The Elements of Creating Collective Space” by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SONG-Alchemy-The-Elements-of-Creating-Collective-Space.pdf) [el folleto]

-“Relational Organizing” by Southerners on New Ground (https://southernersonnewground.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/SONG-Relational-Organizing.pdf) [el folleto]

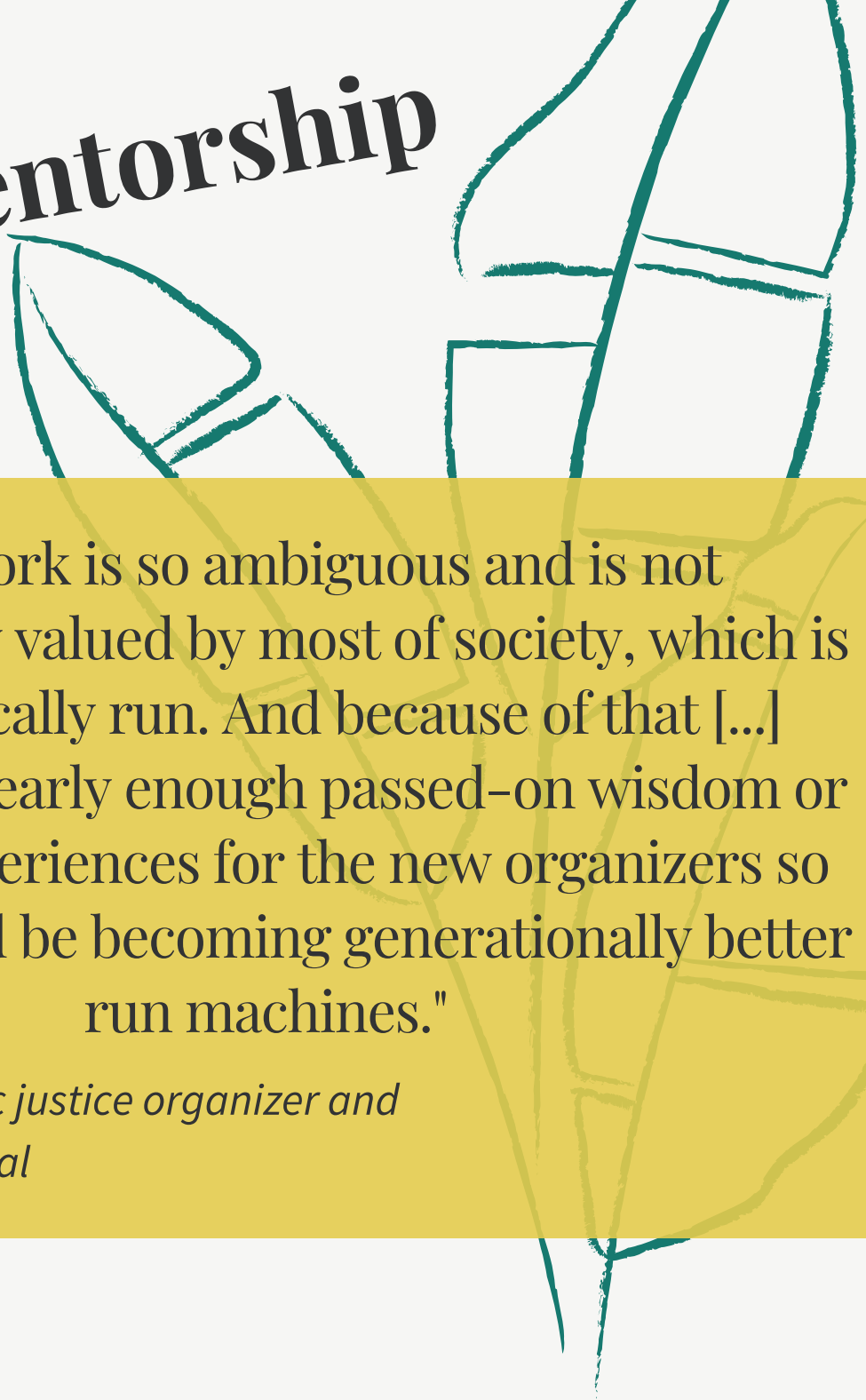
-“Relational Organizing in an Electoral Context” by Acronym (2018, June 4) (https://medium.com/@anotheracronym/relational-organizing-in-an-electoral-context-6293042cd0f9) [el artículo]

-“Mapping Our Futures: Economics and Governance Curriculum by Highlander Research and Education Center (https://highlandercenter.org/our-impact/economics-governance/) [plan de estudios]

IN CONVERSATION WITH CURRENT + FORMER ORGANIZERS

Getting Stuck: Common Challenges in Progressive Community Organizing

Scarce Mentorship



"This work is so ambiguous and is not meaningfully valued by most of society, which is capitalistically run. And because of that [...] there's not nearly enough passed-on wisdom or work or experiences for the new organizers so that we could be becoming generationally better run machines."

-Social + economic justice organizer and local elected official

Scarce Mentorship

"It is difficult to mentor someone else when you are so burned out."

-Organizer, economic justice and civic engagement

Conflict Mediation as Individual Carework

"Just like, hundreds of hours stocked into reading through Facebook posts and replying to things and then going into private messaging and being like, 'Are you okay?' You know, 'You seem pretty upset.' So just a lot of soothing ruffled feathers or trying to figure out where people stood on certain issues or trying to do conflict mediation."

-Organizer, economic and social justice

Exclusion and Co-Optation

"They left me behind the picture. And when they were interviewed or when they created the webpage, they were saying that four professors of [the university] initiated [the project], which was not true because it was an initiative of the community and community organizers."

-Organizer, immigrant rights and liberation

Sense of Urgency

"I didn't feel as accepted in [the] organizing space as I had hoped. I felt like there was a requirement to have a personality that meant that I move very quickly, I had to sacrifice my other interests, and I had to devote everything to this cause all day, every day. Need to be in the messages, need to reply, need to be available, and if I'm not, it's a testament to my commitment."

-Organizer, labor and racial justice

Difficulty Building Capacity

"So recruiting volunteers is tough, and hanging on to volunteers, and finding people who will actually do what they say is tough because people are not getting paid for this usually. It made me kind of resentful in a leadership role."

-Organizer, candidate development

Atascarnos: Desafíos Comunes en la Organización Comunitaria Progresista

La Mentoría Escasa

"Este trabajo es tan ambiguo y no se valida mucho por la mayor parte de la sociedad, la que se organiza de manera capitalista. Por eso [...] no hay ni de lejos la sabiduría trasmitida o el trabajo o las experiencias suficientes para los nuevos organizadores para que pudiéramos hacernos máquinas mejor manejadas generacionalmente."

-Organizador de justicia social y económica y funcionario local elegido

La Mentoría Escasa

"Es difícil guiar a alguien más cuando estás tan agotada."

-Organizadora de justicia económica y participación cívica

La mediación del conflicto como trabajo de cuidados individual

"Como que, cientos de horas usadas en leer posts de Facebook y en responder a cosas y entonces ir a los mensajes privados para decir, como, “¿Estás bien?”, sabes, “pareces bien molesto.” Así pues, mucho tiempo invertido en ayudar a recobrar la calma o tratar de averiguar las diferentes posturas o tratar de mediar los conflictos."

-Organizadora de justicia social y económica

La Exclusión y la Cooptación

"Me dejaron detrás de la foto. Y cuando se les entrevistó o cuando crearon la página web, decían que cuatro profesores iniciaron el proyecto, lo que no era verdad porque fue una iniciativa de la comunidad y de los organizadores."

-Organizador, la liberación y los derechos de los migrantes

El Sentido de Urgencia

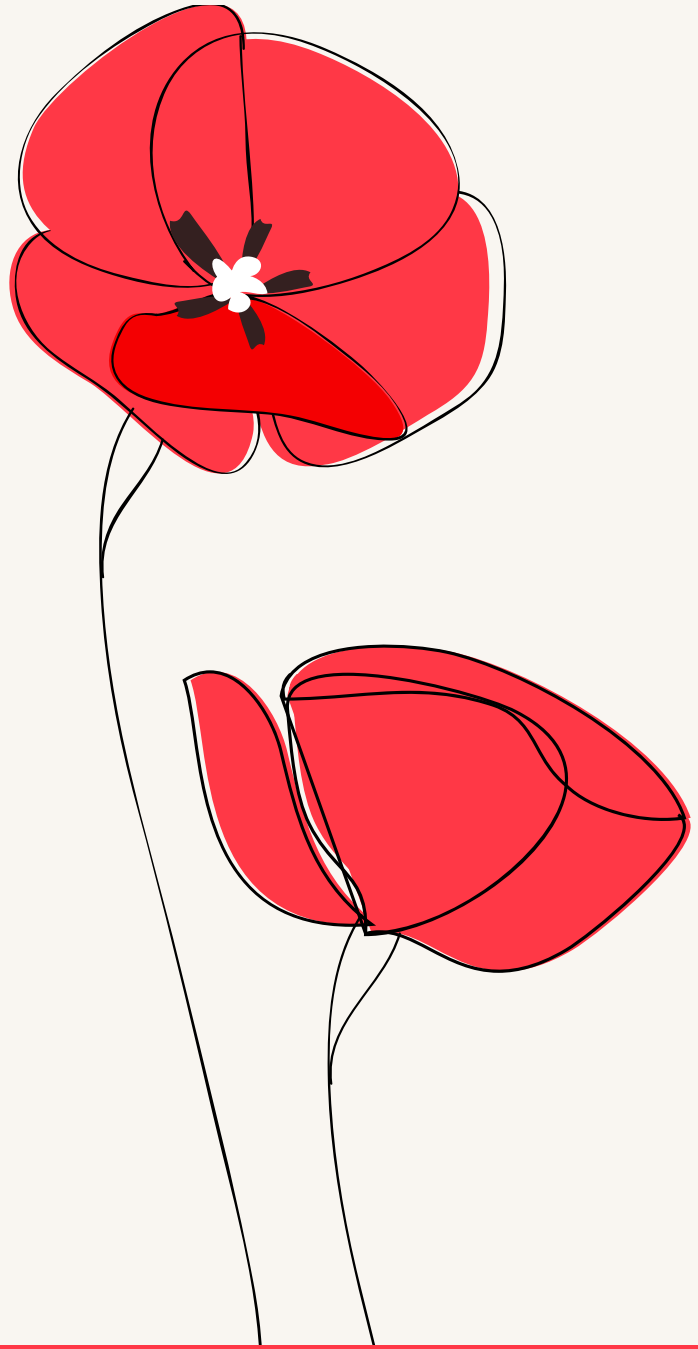
"Me sentía como que había un requisito a tener una personalidad que significaba que tenía que moverme muy rápido, que tenía que sacrificar mis otros intereses y que tenía que dedicar todo a esta causa todo el día, todos los días. Había que estar en los mensajes, que responder, que estar disponible, y si no, es un testimonio de mi compromiso."

-Organizadora de justicia racial y laboral

Las Trabas en el Aumento de Capacidad

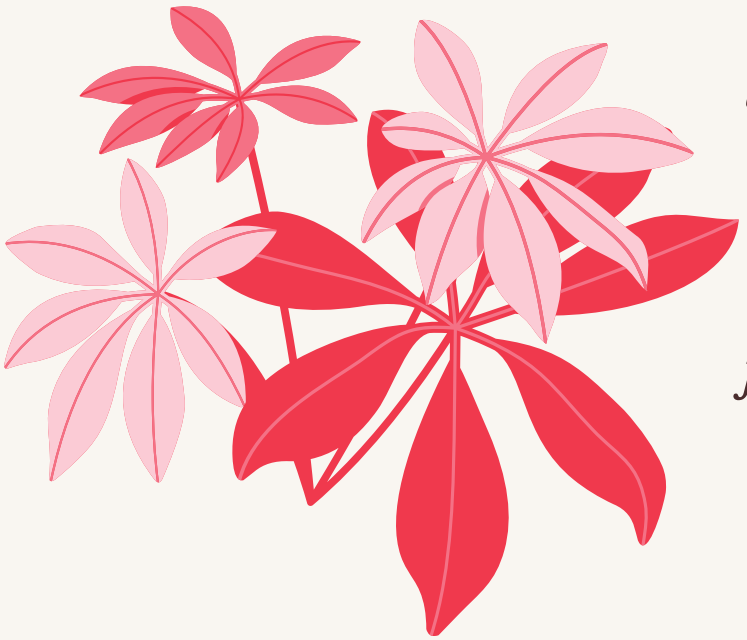
"“Pues, reclutar voluntarios es difícil, y conservar voluntarios, y encontrar a gente que de verdad haga lo que dice es difícil porque no se paga por esto normalmente.”

-Organizadora de desarrollo de candidatos



Building Healthy and Sustainable Organizing Communities

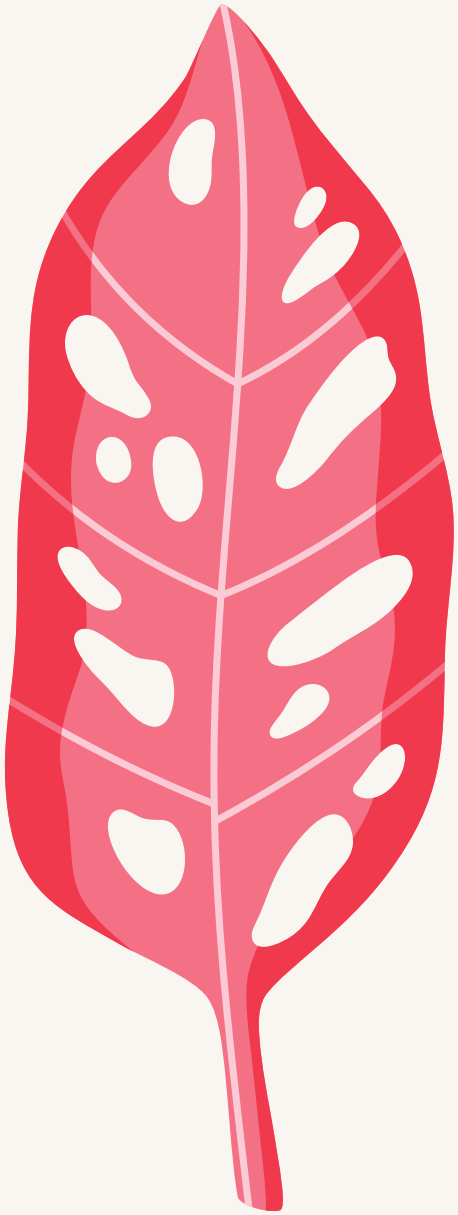
MEDITATIONS AND NEEDS FROM CURRENT AND FORMER ORGANIZERS



"I think it's beneficial for the elders, the millennials, the generation X, to always take time to figure out the landscape and history. That's the difference that I see, that things are still so urgent, we gotta do it now, but I do believe that there are some elders who would be glad to say, 'well this we've tried before' or 'watch out for this because this happened before.' You have to do that to be successful because if you're speeding, you're gonna make the same mistakes I made 30 years ago and that's not necessary if you take an extra few minutes to figure out what has already been done."

ORGANIZER + LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIAL

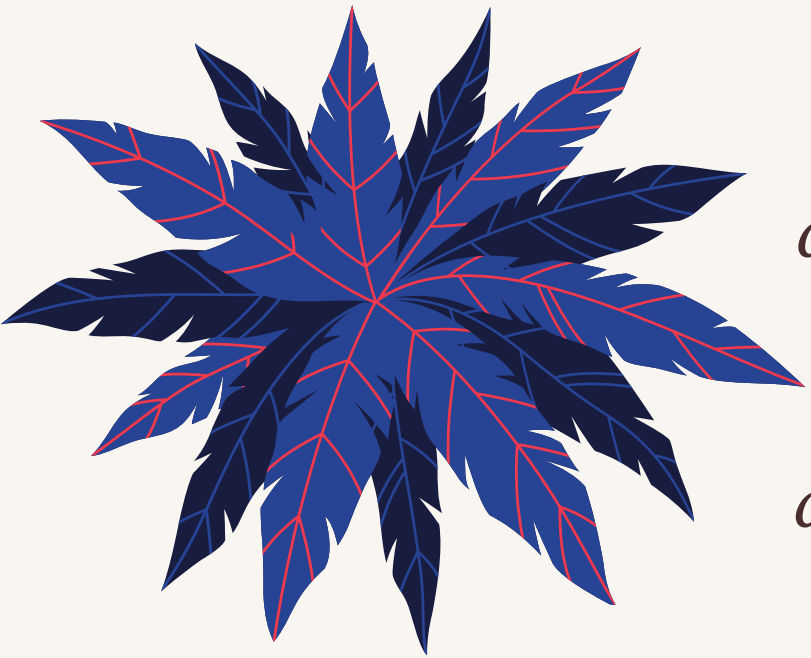
MENTORSHIP



"So the festival was our approach to give witness to undocumented immigrants' contributions. [...] And we are creating a very community with our food, with our music, so it was a statement. It was a political statement through the art."

IMMIGRANT RIGHTS AND LIBERATION ORGANIZER

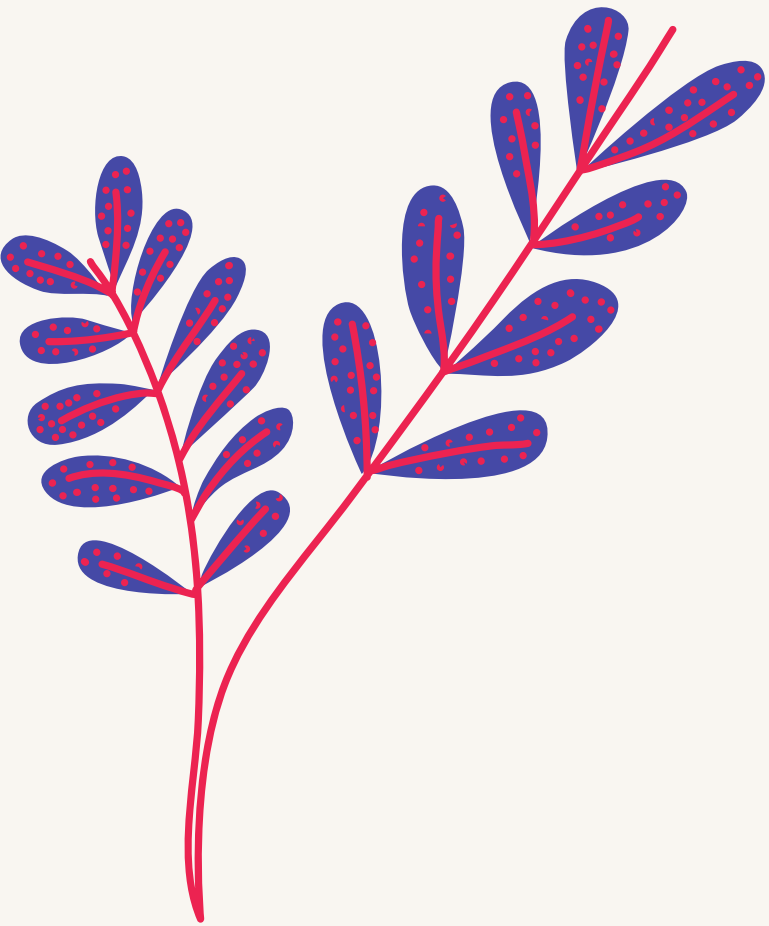
CREATIVITY



"I remember the first time we had a big victory with putting Sunday buses in place, I snuck into our next Board meeting a bottle of champagne and hid it behind my chair. So when it came to that part, we popped the cork and all drank champagne together because we needed to celebrate these victories and how this was because of everybody working together."

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE ORGANIZER + ELECTED OFFICIAL

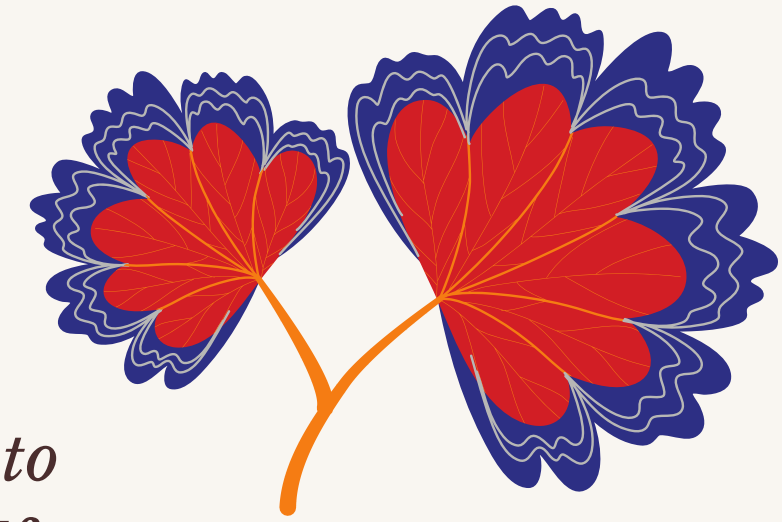
CELEBRATION



"Just like, hundreds of hours stocked into reading through Facebook posts and replying to things and then going into private messaging and being like, 'Are you okay?' You know, 'You seem pretty upset.' So just a lot of soothing ruffled feathers or trying to figure out where people stood on certain issues or trying to do conflict mediation."

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE ORGANIZER

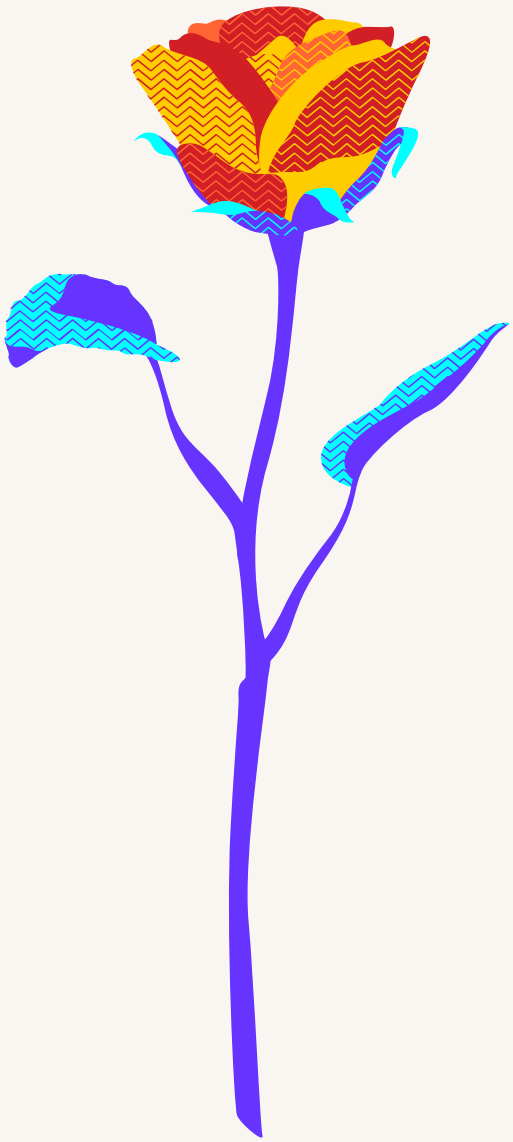
CARE INFRASTRUCTURE



I think once you get so deep into organizing, there's no time. If you're in a role, you're going from one thing to the next. And you know, most people have jobs, so I try to be purposeful. I try to do a lot of reflecting.

EDUCATION ORGANIZER + LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIAL

HEALTHY PACING

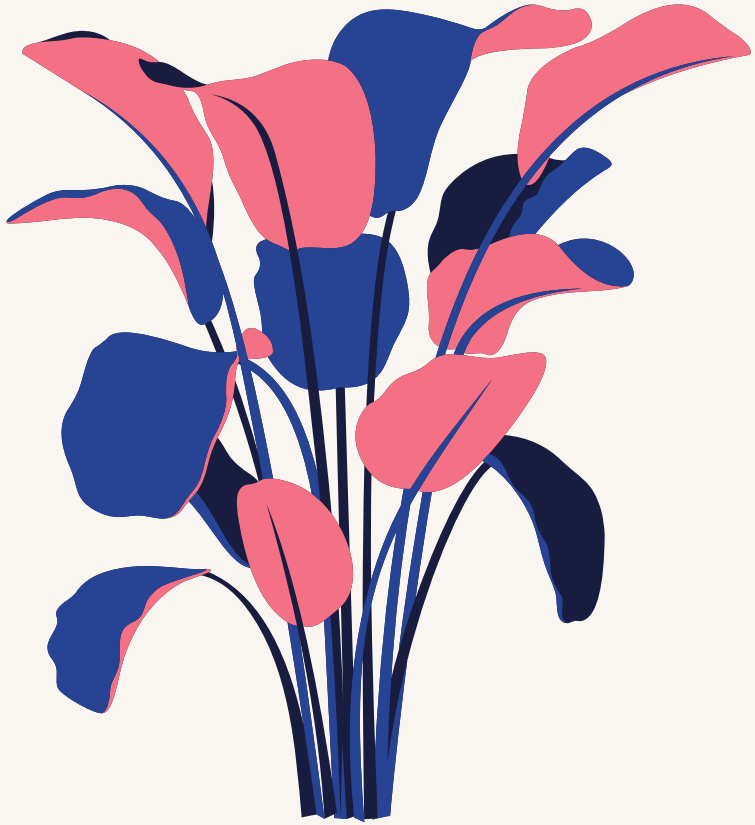


"I believe that we have a kinda knowledge. In the school we learn things, and they teach us some things, but in our house our parents, our siblings, they teach us other things. And those things are with us all the time. And for many generations we pass on a kind of knowledge which is not in writing...it's deep in our DNA. And I think that is where our humanity resides."

IMMIGRANT RIGHTS AND LIBERATION ORGANIZER

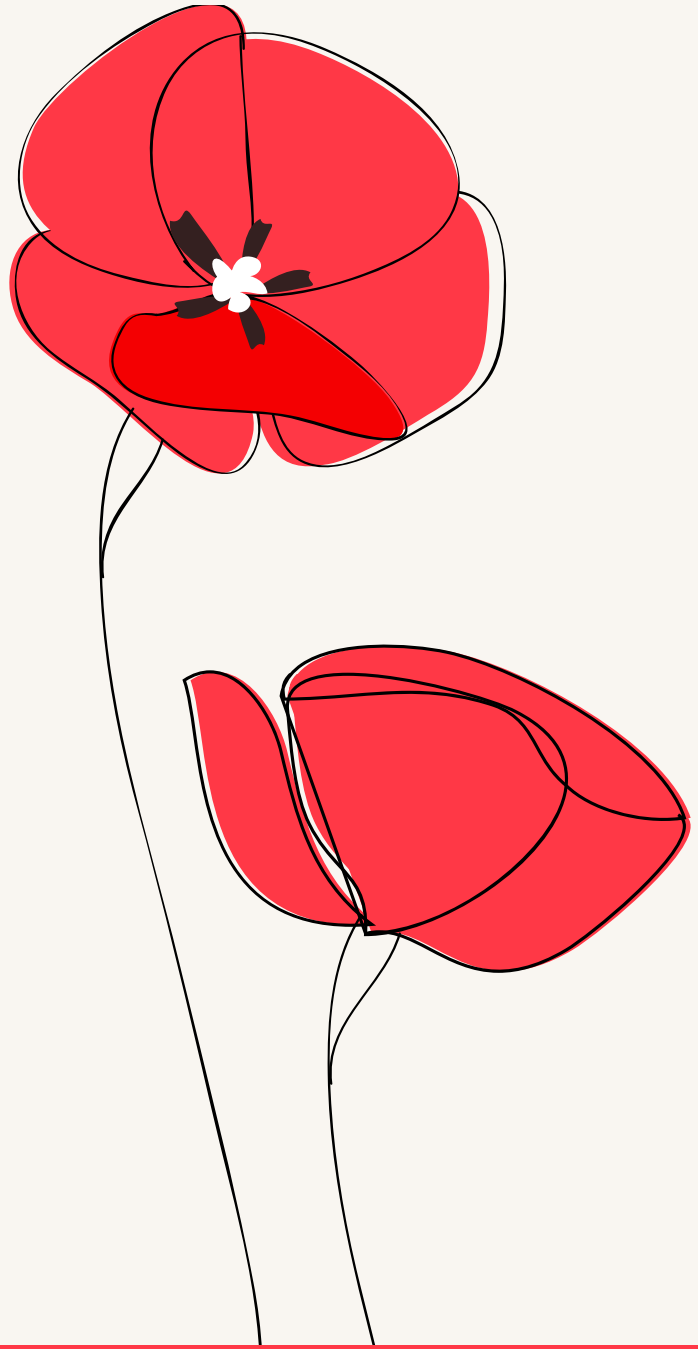
COLLECTIVE LEARNING

"There's so much work that has to be done but in order to make the work go smoothly, the people need to trust the other parts of their body. Kind of like it's one body with all these different limbs and we needed to be able to agree on what direction we were going in and agree on how to do it."



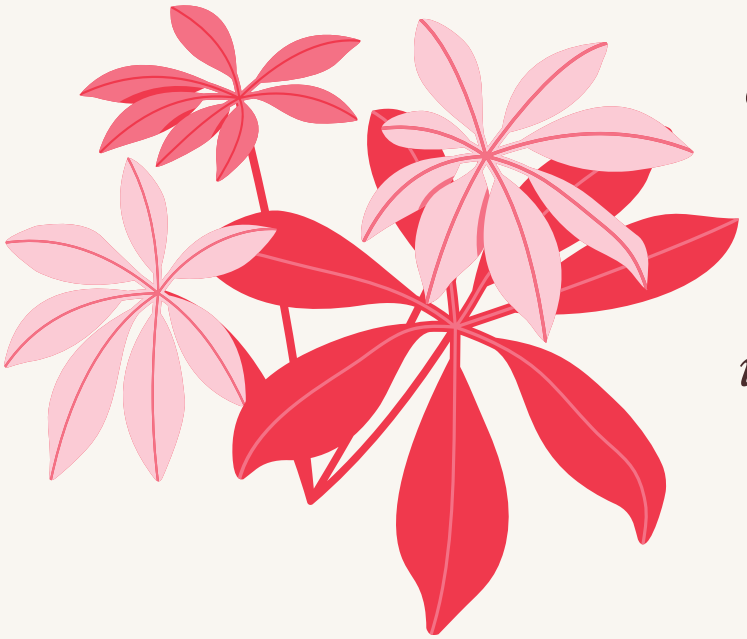
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE ORGANIZER

RELATIONAL ORGANIZING



Construir Comunidades de Organización Saludables y Sostenibles

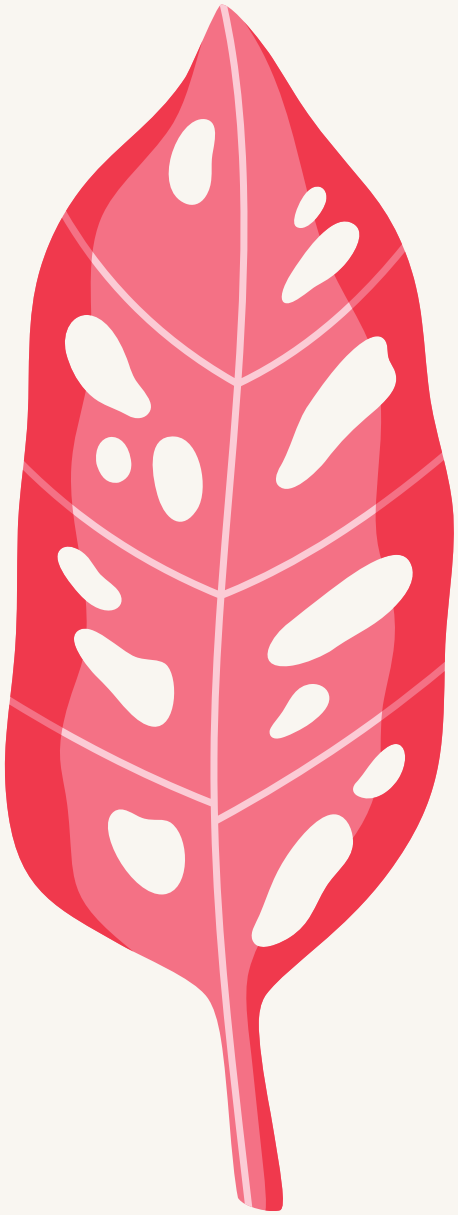
MEDITACIONES Y NECESIDADES DE ANTIGUOS Y ACTUALES ORGANIZADORES



"Creo que es ventajoso que los mayores, los millennials, la generación X, tomen siempre el tiempo de averiguar el panorama y la historia. Esa es la diferencia que yo veo, que las cosas siguen siendo tan urgentes, tenemos que hacerlo ya, pero sí creo que hay algunos mayores bien dispuestos a decir "pues ya intentamos eso" o "cuídate con esto porque esto ya pasó." Tienes que hacer eso para tener éxito porque si vas demasiado rápido vas a cometer los mismo errores que yo hace 30 años y no es necesario si tomas unos minutos más para aprender lo que ya se hizo."

ORGANIZADORA Y FUNCIONARIO LOCAL ELEGIDO

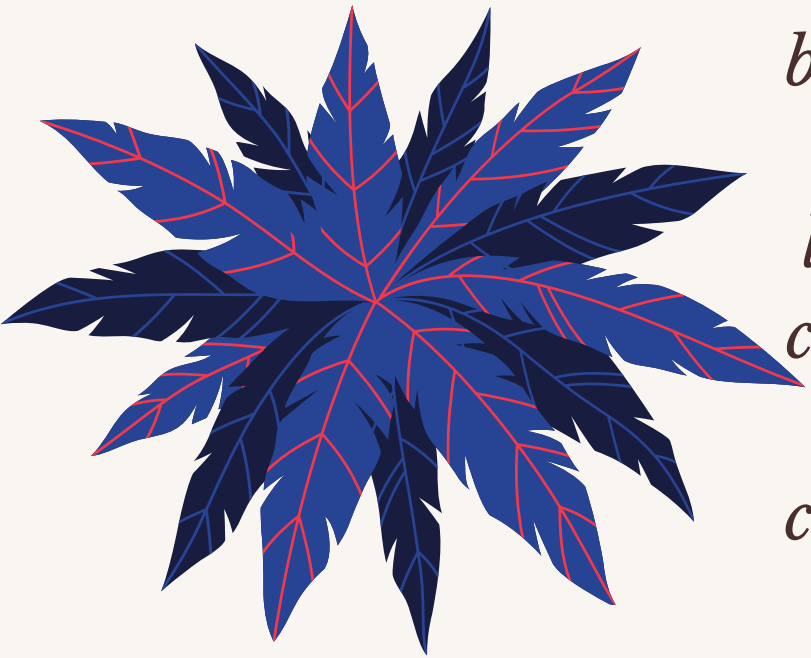
MENTORÍA



"Así que el festival fue nuestra manera de dar testimonio a las contribuciones de los inmigrantes indocumentados. Y estamos creando una comunidad con nuestra comida, con nuestra música, así que fue una declaración. Fue una declaración política a través del arte."

ORGANIZADOR,LA LIBERACIÓN Y LOS DERECHOS DE LOS MIGRANTES

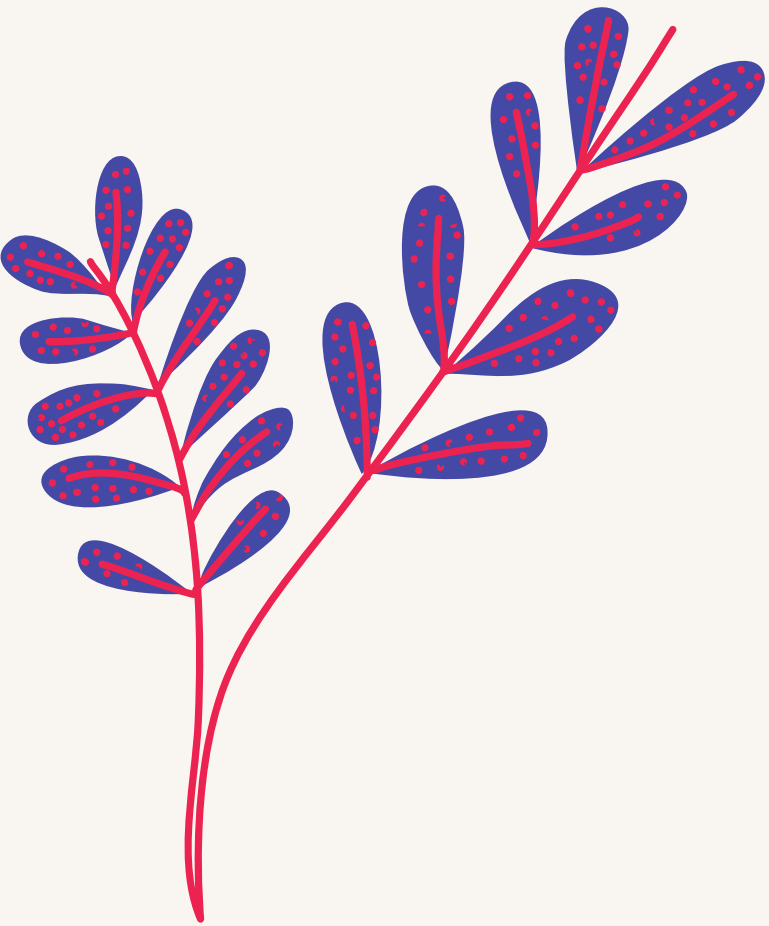
LA CREATIVIDAD



"Recuerdo la primera gran victoria cuando establecimos los buses de los domingos, colé en la próxima junta de la mesa una botella de champaña y la escondí detrás de mi silla. Y cuando llegamos a esa parte, sacamos el corcho y todos tomamos juntos la champaña porque había que celebrar estas victorias y que esto fue porque todos trabajamos juntos."

ORGANIZADOR DE JUSTICIA SOCIAL Y ECONÓMICA Y FUNCIONARIO LOCAL ELEGIDO

LA CELEBRACIÓN



"Como que, cientos de horas usadas en leer posts de Facebook y en responder a cosas y entonces ir a los mensajes privados para decir, como, "¿Estás bien?", sabes, "pareces bien molesto." Así pues, mucho tiempo invertido en ayudar a recobrar la calma o tratar de averiguar las diferentes posturas o tratar de mediar los conflictos."

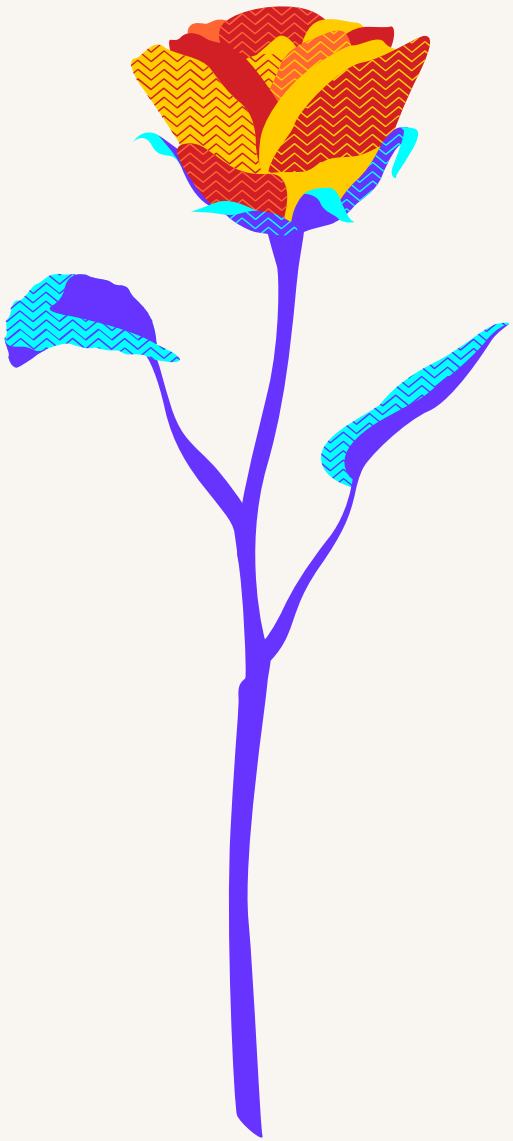
ORGANIZADORA DE JUSTICIA SOCIAL Y ECONÓMICA

LA INFRAESTRUCTURA DE CUIDADOS

"Creo que una vez que te metes profundamente, no hay tiempo. Si tienes un rol, vas de una cosa a la otra. Y sabes, la mayor parte de la gente trabaja, así que trato de tener un propósito claro. Trato de reflexionar mucho."

ORGANIZADORA DE EDUCACIÓN
Y FUNCIONARIA LOCAL ELEGIDA

UN RITMO SALUDABLE

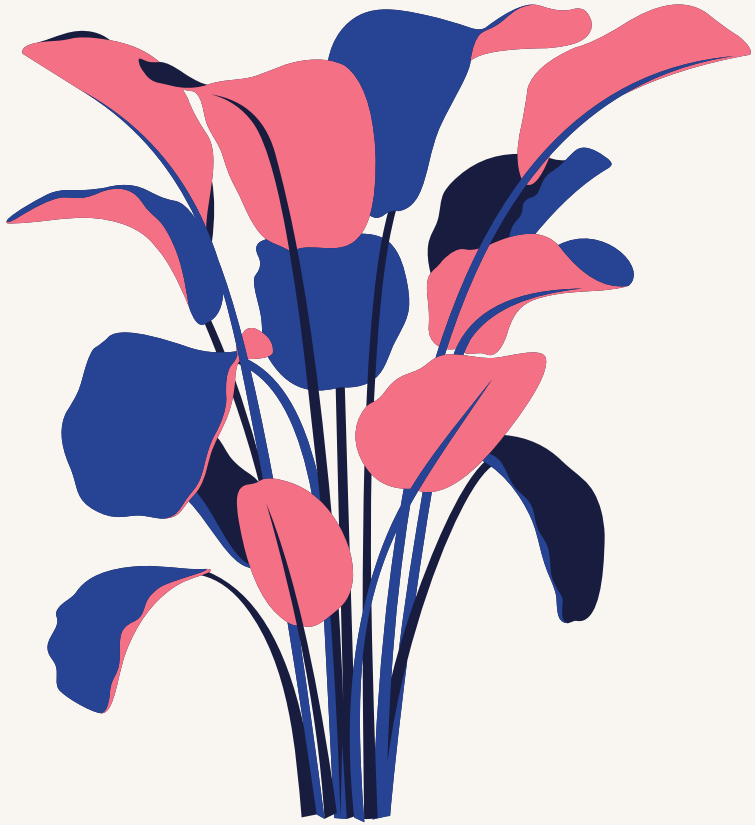


"Creo que tenemos un tipo de conocimiento. En la escuela aprendemos cosas y nos enseñan algunas cosas, pero en nuestra casa los padres, los hermanos, nos enseñan otras cosas. Y esas cosas siempre están con nosotros. Y por muchas generaciones pasamos un tipo de conocimiento que no está escrito...está en las profundidades de nuestro ADN. Y creo que es allí donde reside nuestra humanidad."

ORGANIZADOR,LA LIBERACIÓN Y LOS DERECHOS DE LOS MIGRANTES

EL APRENDIZAJE COLECTIVO

"Hace falta tanto trabajo, pero para que vaya fluidamente la gente necesita confiar en las otras partes del cuerpo. Como si fuera un solo cuerpo con muchas extremidades y necesitábamos poder estar de acuerdo sobre la dirección en que íbamos y de cómo hacerlo."



ORGANIZADORA DE JUSTICIA SOCIAL Y ECONÓMICA

LA ORGANIZACIÓN RELACIONAL

APPENDIX B

ROUNDTABLE AGENDAS

Dreaming Sustainable + Affirming Approaches to Community Organizing
Roundtable Discussion #1
August 15, 2020 ❦ 3:00-4:30 P.M.

Hellos and Intros (10 min)

- Go around and share your name, pronouns, setting in community, and something that's igniting joy for you despite the challenges that this year has brought so far

Project Overview: Purpose and Structure (15 min)

Review Community Agreements: Anything to add or change? (10 min)

- Listen actively and respond with curiosity rather than judgment.
- Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing ("I" instead of "they," "we," and "you").
- Do not be afraid to respectfully challenge one another by asking questions, but refrain from personal attacks -- focus on ideas.
- Instead of invalidating somebody else's story with your own spin on their experience, share your own story and experience.
- The goal is not to agree -- it is to gain a deeper understanding.
- Embrace feedback or correction as an opportunity for growth.
- Participate to the fullest of your ability. Community growth depends on the inclusion of every individual voice. For participants with privilege (e.g., White, man, straight, cisgender, able-bodied, U.S. citizen, etc.), check in with yourself to make sure your silence is not simply perpetuating an oppressive status quo.
- Notice how much you are speaking, and if you find yourself to be dominating the space, step back so others can participate.
- Take care of yourself. Move around, have a snack...whatever you need during our time together to participate most fully.
- Lean into vulnerability and/or discomfort as an opportunity for growth.
- Maintain confidentiality around what we discuss in this space together.

Excerpted and adapted from:
http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/groundrules.html

Group Discussion: Mapping Our Encounters in Community Organizing (40 min)

- *Guiding question*: Think about and share an event that was a turning point for you in your community organizing (i.e., surprises, disappointments, pleasures, tensions)? What did you learn or take away?

Plans for Next Time (10 min)

Farewells for now (5 min)

Dreaming Sustainable + Affirming Approaches to Community Organizing
Roundtable Discussion #2
September 20, 2020 ❦ 4:00-5:30 P.M.

Hellos and Intros (10 min)

https://www.npr.org/2020/08/10/896695759/black-activist-burnout-you-can-t-do-this-work-if-you-re-running-on-empty

Logistics (5 min)

Recapping Roundtable #1 (5 min)

Review Community Agreements: Anything to add or change? (5 min)

- Listen actively and respond with curiosity rather than judgment.
- Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing ("I" instead of "they," "we," and "you").
- Do not be afraid to respectfully challenge one another by asking questions, but refrain from personal attacks -- focus on ideas.
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http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/groundrules.html

Visioning: What do we need to thrive in our community organizing work? (55 min)

Plans for Next Time (5 min)

Farewells for now (5 min)

Dreaming Sustainable + Affirming Approaches to Community Organizing
Roundtable Discussion #3
Friday, October 30, 2020 ❦ 5:00-6:30 P.M.

Welcome + Hellos (10 min)

Recapping Roundtable #2 (5 min)

Envisioning a Way Forward: Sustainability in Community Organizing (30 min)
Key insights:

1. Trusting relationships + honest communication
2. Adaptable pacing
3. Mentorship opportunities
4. Creative work environments
5. Clear, measurable goals
6. Culture of appreciation and celebration
7. Space for training/collaborative education
8. Anything else?

Next Steps: What Do We Want to Come Out of This? (30 min)

- Sustainability in Community Organizing: A Handbook for Organizers
    - Suggested practices, processes, resources
- Social media graphics/campaign
- Blog post(s)/op-eds
- Community forum
- Workshop(s)
- Any other ideas?

Gratitude + farewells for now (5 min)

APPENDIX C

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL CONVERSATIONS

1. Can you share a little bit about your organizing and advocacy trajectory?
2. How do you decide where to direct your energy? How do you decide what your next project will be?
3. Can you talk about how you decide who to collaborate with in your work?
4. Can you talk about any times you felt stuck…uncertain about what to do next, or overwhelmed, or conflicted, or frustrated? What happened?
    a. Can you say a little bit more about those feelings?
    b. How did you move through it, adapt, or shift the course of the project?
5. Any times that stand out to you as being particularly joyful or pleasurable in your community organizing?
    a. What do you think made that the case?
6. What kinds of relationships or supports have you found you need to sustain and nourish your work?
    a. How do you find them?
    b. Have you experienced moments when these needs aren't met? What happened?
7. Do you have any rituals or practices that you look to to help you navigate your organizing work or facilitate/nourish your engagement + commitment to the work?

8. Can you describe the spaces where you do or have done most of your advocacy and activism work? What do they look/feel/sound like, and is there anything you wish were there to facilitate your thriving? Could talk about during or pre-COVID.
9. Wisdom from others – mentors, elders, historical figures – that has shaped your approach to organizing?
10. Can you talk about any lessons you've learned through all your experience so far? Any nuggets of wisdom you've gathered that you'd particularly like to pass on to other activists and organizers?