

MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LOVE
THE BUILDING OF CRITICAL COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE
RELATIONAL GEOGRAPHY OF MOVEMENT SPACES

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*We must love and protect each other. . . .
We have nothing to lose but our chains.*

—Assata Shakur

This piece chronicles the journey of friendships and relationships that are created in movement spaces. Movement and organizing work can and sometimes do produce strains and pressure that rupture organizations and relationships. In writing this piece, I aim to celebrate the creation of new beginnings and the strengthening of bonds that exist despite the tensions and dynamics that arise within movement spaces that may destroy such bonds. In this work, I query the impossibility of such bonds and their requisite necessity for critical community. I posit that without bond formation that can withstand the pressure of collective assault, psycho-spiritual trauma, risk of physical annihilation, and T/terrors inflicted by institutionalized forces mobilized to suppress collective resistance and other social tools of oppression, movements cannot build critical communities of solidarity.

I have chosen autoethnography as my methodology for this essay because it allows me to explore what justice looks like in action and how justice influences my relational intentionality in living out my own radical politics of liberation. Relationship-building has kept me accountable to the movement as well as sustained my engagement in highly turbulent, emergent, and volatile spaces of protest and confrontation. I write the life of relational bonds formed, forged, tested, and tightened through the crucible of daily connection and episodic Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) organizing work. Guided by the Black intellectual tradition of Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, Patricia

Hill-Collins, and others, I narrate the story of my participation in M4BL events across various US locales—Cleveland, Ohio, Ferguson, Missouri, Tucson, Arizona, among others. The centering of Black people and Black lives has been overwhelming in its ability to heal and transform. It is in direct contrast to the leadership in educational, political, and religious institutions in this country. These centering spaces have allowed us venues to unapologetically love each other and ourselves. This autoethnography will use the phenomenology of my embodied experience, sense-making, and construction of meaning to examine our organizing strategies as we challenge ourselves to do better, be better, and strive for liberation for all Black people. It will also chronicle how particular relational dynamics emerged and led to more M4BL activities, and illustrate the caregiving and life-sustaining strategies engaged at the individual, relational, and collective levels. In documenting my experiences, my purpose is to offer readers a glimpse of relationships that intersect and diverge from my own and ultimately invite them to see the implications for our personhood and collectivity vis-à-vis this movement. Like movement-building, this writing is episodic, continuous, shifting, and at times conflicting.

I open this essay with the words of Assata Shakur because her words have become a mantra in contemporary Black organizing and liberation spaces. These words act as an affirmation and as a call to action reminding us of the power of love. Public intellectual Cornel West states, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” What does “doing the work” of justice look like in relationships? What does love and support look like inside and outside of organizing spaces? Given that creating and maintaining the communities that arise in response to state-sanctioned violence require intentionality, what kinds of intentionalities are revealed through the looking glass of relationships within organizing contexts?

Critical self-work compels me to understand and explore my experiences, continually scanning them for meanings so that I can sharpen my intentions in every opportunity in the fight against injustices. A lack of clarity and laser-sharp honesty about intentions can reinscribe biases and obscure the part that we unintentionally play in hegemony. For myself and presumably for others engaged in political spaces like M4BL, movement-building spaces have become places to practice a politics of radical liberation. These spaces force my practice to match my theory and rhetoric. My politics of liberation are nurtured by womanist and Black feminist writings. As Alice Walker asserts in her definition of “womanist,” I am “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people” (vi, vii). I believe that liberation is spiritual and emotional as well as physical. Survival means little if our souls and spirits are not intact.

My politics of liberation, like Audre Lorde's, demands that I use my voice even when I am afraid. It centers those who are systemically devalued, those who were not meant to survive. The devaluation of Black life has been a key feature of our world, and we must consciously fight internalizing destructive messages. No one is disposable, right? Thus, we must continue to find ways to seek restoration within and among all of us. Assata's words are more than just a mantra; they are a blueprint for Black liberation. I invoke her life and experiences throughout this essay.

MESSAGE TO MY PEOPLE

January 2015, Tucson, Arizona. It was the end of the day. Patrisse gathered us into a circle, where she led us in the Assata chant: "It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other. And support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains." With each line we recited, our collective power built into a crescendo, ending with Patrisse screaming with all her might, "We have nothing to lose but our chains!"

This chant and mantra seen on hoodies,¹ heard at actions and repeated as affirmations, was originally written in a letter to us by Assata Shakur. Assata recorded her letter on July 4, 1973, while incarcerated at Middlesex County Workhouse. She wrote through the pain of her injured and paralyzed arm while being denied the physical therapy she needed to heal. She wrote against the narrative promulgated in the national media. "It was obvious the press was trying to railroad me, to make me seem like a monster. According to them i was a common criminal, just going around shooting down cops for the hell of it," she explained (49).

"Cop-Killer" is how she would be described by many in New Jersey and the surrounding areas. The push from the historically racist New Jersey State Troopers would grant her the status of the first woman on the FBI's "Most Wanted Terrorist" list in May 2013. This status came forty years after Assata Shakur escaped from incarceration and received asylum in Cuba. The moniker of "terrorist" connotes the use of unlawful violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims. Law enforcement and the United States government have unjustly given this label to Assata Shakur and countless other political activists (see Khan-Cullors). The positioning of Assata and other Black militants as enemies of the state is a small part of the larger history of the United States of America's history of attacking and discrediting those who challenge the imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy that has defined this country since its founding. The US establishment's framing of Assata's alleged crimes often fails to contextualize the historical and political moment this country was in during the 1970s. Black

youth of the 1970s had many reasons to be angry and disillusioned with the system. Today, we continue to see prosecutors and media paint activists as common criminals without acknowledging the social and political contexts that create the resistance.

In 1973, Assata knew that we, her “Black brothers” and “Black sisters,” needed to hear of her love for us. She went on to define what it means to be a revolutionary and to outline the ways this country systemically disenfranchises us politically, economically, and socially in her “Message to My People”: “I have declared war on all forces that have raped our women, castrated our men, and kept out babies empty-bellied. I have declared war on the rich who prosper on our poverty, the politicians who lie to us with smiling faces, and all the mindless, heartless robots who protect them and their property” (50). She wrote to give us hope: “We must gain our liberation by any means necessary. . . . We must fight on” (50). The advice and affirmations she delivered in her love letter and in *Assata: An Autobiography* continue to aid Black people fighting against oppression globally. It is not surprising M4BL has embraced a mantra that comes from Assata’s writing early in her incarceration, broadcast on a day on which Black Americans see most clearly the hypocrisy of this country: “Independence Day.” Assata understood that her path to freedom and liberation would be a long uphill battle.

Repeating Assata’s words, I felt empowered and moved by our collective energies and the passion I sensed in our united voices. I was surrounded by friends from undergrad and graduate school, folks I had met the previous September in Ferguson, organizers I had collaborated with from Columbus, academics I had admired and followed for years—folks I recognized but had never met, as well as many new faces. This chant is now mantra and rallying cry for the M4BL. It reminds us of our collective intentions to combat state-sanctioned violence, but it also ritualizes the presence of critical community. But who has shaped me and prepared me for my participation in this communal space? What does it mean to love and care about Black people both politically and personally? Where does theorizing about the worth of Black lives intersect with the practice of engaging Black folks as worthy? These are questions that we must navigate and confront daily. The interconnectedness of organizing spaces reminds us of how small our world is and that the two or three degrees that separate us also bind us. A major aspect of organizing and dismantling oppressive structures involves self-work and an understanding of one’s self. While we might not always get it right, we are all in the process of learning and growing. Creating a movement toward love and support means no one is disposable. As I interrogate my own life history, the first glyph to emerge arises as follows in my journaling, writings, musings, and chronicling of my participation in the M4BL activities of the past three years.

REVOLUTIONARY GODMOTHER, M/OTHERING IN THE MOVEMENT

I am interested in the lessons that Assata teaches us.

I am interested in the creative spirit of Assata that made her dream in places devoid of hope. I am interested in how her poetry creates blueprints for how we can create systemic change.

I am interested in becoming a threat to this nation's actions of oppression and injustice. Out of Assata's presence I learn revolutionary tactics that supersede my presence as a citizen of this country, of this world.

Assata teaches us the physical, emotional, and spiritual cost of freedom.

I am interested in knowing what it means for a woman to survive prison and incarceration in facilities that are inadequate by design in the honoring of individual personhood and humanity, are inept by intent in their respect and care for women and children.

I am interested in challenging unjust laws, racist systems.

I am interested in loving in places that are devoid of love.

IF I WROTE YOU A LETTER . . .

When was the last time you received a letter from a loved one? The type of letter you have to sit down to read, the type that brings you joy? Could you hear your loved one's voice through the page? Did their personality rise through the words—through their handwriting? Was their cursive sloppy or their script perfect? Did you keep the letter and place it somewhere safe? Did you read certain passages over and over? Did you feel special? Did you feel loved?

The process of receiving and sending letters has always been critical in the struggle for Black liberation. Letters are a way to forge bonds, create community, and show solidarity. Letters are a way to love and support one another. Martin mapped the aims of the civil rights movement while incarcerated in a Birmingham jail (see King Jr.). His letter now serves as a document of that period and a call for liberation. Harriet Jacobs told us about life as an enslaved girl through her letters and gave voice to the reality of enslavement (see Jacobs). Black Lives Matter cofounder Alicia Garza asserts that BLM “began as a love letter to black people” (see Scroggin). She went on to outline the aims of this love letter in “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” while also offering affirmations of the contribution Black folks have made to our world (see Garza). Letters describe the political and social realities of the letter writer. Letters are key in creating and sustaining relationships.

Beyond their political use by social justice leaders reaching out to us to “keep up the work of justice,” letters hold out to us an intimacy and an offering of love. Letters are key in creating and sustaining relationships. Emotional

relationships are important when your freedom is so restricted, Angela Davis says of the bond she shared with another former member of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP), George Jackson, during his incarceration. The correspondence that Jackson and Davis maintained sustained them, as when Jackson writes, “I think about *you all of the time*. I like thinking about you, it gives me occasion for some of the first few really deeply felt ear-to-ear grins. And I’ve had to increase the number of my daily push-ups by half. That will make me stronger. The contact has been good for me in a hundred ways” (161). Through her letters Davis spoke of the depression she experienced in the work of social activism. Jackson spoke of his dreams of liberation and love for Black women; he refers to Angela in the dedication of *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* as his “tender experience” (2). He spoke of his need for her to believe in him as she spoke to her belief in him (Schroeder).

Davis’s and Jackson’s letters, like their love, defied the state and its regulations. Their letters existed despite protocols of isolation as prison guards and others had to sneak Davis’s messages to George since Davis wasn’t on the approved list. These letters of love and faithfulness later became the crux of the state’s case against Angela Davis (see Schroeder). August 14, 1970, an arrest warrant was issued for Davis for murder and attempted kidnapping by providing weapons to aid in Jonathan Jackson’s attempt to free his brother seven days prior (see Martin). The love she declared in her letters to George was used by the prosecutor as evidence of her participation in the crime (see Schroeder). Loving Black men is criminal in a country that profits off our hatred for each other.

What does it mean when our love, our words, our letters become the very thing we are punished for? The state’s reaction to and use of the letters demonstrate how powerful Black love and bonds can be. It is the words of our loved ones that sustain us when our freedom is limited by the state—whether through incarceration, poverty, sickness, or mortality. Assata’s aunt and lawyer was threatened to be removed from the case because she helped Assata record and share her letter, “Message to My People.” The state of Pennsylvania created and passed a law to silence Mumia Abu-Jamal and in the process silenced other incarcerated people. The now-defunct “Revictimization Relief Act Law” made it illegal for those incarcerated to speak publicly after being convicted (see Volokh). Our voices and our messages are powerful; the state is constantly trying to silence us.

We wrotelwrite letters to Bresha.² We let her know we are here. We let her know we care. With our words we affirm her humanity as the state continuously denies her justice. We write letters in community-classrooms, workshops, and teach-ins. We strengthen our feminist bonds and fight for freedom. We tell stories

*of what liberation looks like for young Black girls. We know that if we begin with those who are the most marginalized, we can all get free. We write of our dreams for Bresha and we share our dreams for ourselves, for our children.*³

DESIGNED TO ERADICATE LOVE

It has been ten years since E has been incarcerated. Ten years since I received a call from “an inmate at the Palm Beach County Jail.” Ten years since he informed me of the charges he faced. Ten years since he first asked me for prayers. Ten years of writing and visiting when time and location permits. Putting money on his books when I had it. Ten years of messages from his mama. In these ten years, I have lived in four different states, earned a master’s and a PhD and started my first real job. In these ten years, he has been in eight different correctional institutions and became an uncle and a brother-in-law. He is now a practicing Muslim, while I have stopped following any organized religion.

He feels the need to tell me how he will pay me back once he is free. He is a man, so most of his promises involve being “my man.” I ain’t interested. I tell him he does not owe me anything. In 2010, he was found guilty of first-degree murder, sentenced to life in prison, and sent to some facility ten hours away from the county we grew up in. In 2013, after months of complaining about his Achilles tendon, he was transferred to a medical facility for surgery. This facility was three and a half hours away, and, unlike our previous visits at the county jail, I was able to touch and hug him. I was his first visitor since he had been sentenced. In 2015, Florida’s Fourth District Court of Appeal overturned his murder conviction. He felt freedom was close. The state refiled the charges. He was sent to our county jail to await his second trial.⁴

Prisons are designed to destroy humanity and human connection. I sent him a letter, and it was returned. New policy. Inmates in county are only allowed to receive postcards. Letters (with a character limit) must be sent through a website and require a credit card to purchase virtual stamps. These electronic letters make it easier for prisons to monitor and regulate the information that those who are incarcerated receive. This restriction places limits not only the information inmates can receive but also who can correspond with them. Only the five people on the inmate’s approved list, who must also have computer access and a credit card, can send a letter now. E cannot see my handwriting. E cannot feel me through the pages. Instead he gets some typewritten words delivered on the state’s paper.

December 2016, after a three-year absence, I return to Palm Beach County for a visit. For the first time in six years we are in the same county. I can see him again, I think, until I learn that the county jail no longer does in-person

behind-the-glass visits.⁵ I must schedule a “video” visit through their website. I must speak to him through a grainy video connection. We aren’t in the same location; we are miles apart. He can no longer look at his window and see me when I leave. These digital barriers make him feel even farther from me. This is what the prison industrial complex is designed to do—destroy connections and bonds.

I think of our children. The juvenile detention center that Bresha has spent most of her time in only permits phone calls from her mother, restricted “no contact” visits from her mother, grandmother, and lawyer. Her room does not have a window and she has limited access to the outside. She has missed a year of school. During her court appearance, her family was forced to turn their #FreeBresha shirts inside out to enter the court. This system is designed to make us believe we are not loved. We must fight for ways to love and support each other. The love and support that Assata teaches us to perform looks like letters of love to Bresha and postcards to the prosecutor demanding that charges be dropped. It also means crowdsourcing money to financially support the liberation of Bresha and others. I hear the voices of the folk outside of the detention center, standing with their signs of love and liberation, chanting to all the children inside, “We love you.” We find ways to love and support each other in systems designed to eradicate love.

ACADEMIC WORLDS INTERSECTING WITH ACTIVIST REALITIES

We first met in St. Louis at a conference on Black sexualities studies. I was presenting; she wasn’t. It was a small, intimate conference privileging and centering Black bodies and pleasure. During one of our brief interactions, I told her about my upcoming interview at a university in the Columbus area and mentioned the possibility of living in Columbus if I was hired for the position. She would become my first friend as I transitioned to Ohio and an ally in my first year as university professor. Prior to moving, I could not point out Ohio on a map if my life depended on it. In three and a half years I became intimately connected to Ohio.

I returned to St. Louis almost a year later as a part of a caravan she organized: the Ohio contingent of the Freedom Ride to Ferguson shortly after Mike Brown was killed. We were artists, activists, and academics coming to show the residents of Ferguson our support. The circumstances that brought us to St. Louis had changed, but the centering of Blackness and Black bodies remained consistent. Ferguson allowed me to integrate my activism with my position as an academic. I was compelled and charged with combining the two. My time in Ferguson connected me to people across the nation who were doing the work of M4BL. It put me in proximity with and relationship to people doing the work in Ohio, the state I had just started to call home. I

remember how it felt to stand in Canfield Green as hundreds of people filled the street of West Florissant. Seeing Mike Brown's family. Holding space for each other. Knowing Mike Brown's death wasn't that different from others but that this—the coming together of people from all over the world to chant “Black Lives Matter”—was different. The media coverage, the reaction, the questioning—all of this felt different. Like we were on the verge of something bigger than ourselves.

I met a lot of people in Ferguson. Some of my interactions were brief. Others were intense. Many blossomed into deeper relationships as time went on. We were hosted by Reverend Starsky Wilson. The church provided refuge as we moved through the city. It was a place to eat. To sit. To commune. On Sunday, our last day, Reverend Starsky invited us to worship with his church. We were Black and Brown Queer folk, with various relationships to and opinions of God and of church. I grew up Baptist, intimately tied to the church through my father's position as pastor. I was indoctrinated into Christianity, and although I had my critiques, I had identified as a believer until my early adulthood. The contradictions, the hurt Black people experience within Christian Evangelical spaces, remain central aspects of my academic world. It is evident in my research and teaching interests. My personal interactions with the Black church are kept to a minimum. I remember the framing of the service as an invitation that we were free to decline. I remember people opting out, choosing to go to the basement—they were unable to reconcile the invitation with their knowledge and experiences of the church. I stayed. I was curious. What did a service where the pastor graciously offers refuge to those on the front lines look like? How did his theology intersect with his practice? His sermon, “The Politics of Jesus,” demonstrated the parallels between Mike Brown and Jesus Christ. He examined the ways state-sanctioned violence calls for the murder of Black and Brown folk and leaves power unchecked and unexamined. He preached the responsibilities for those who claimed to be Christian to fight against injustice. I left feeling whole and loved. Being surrounded by Black and Brown Queer folks worshipping God in whatever form felt right. After seeing so much pain and death, we were wrapped in love and care that transcended religious doctrine.

HE TAUGHT US HOW TO FIGHT

I first encountered Marshawn while in Ferguson. He came with the Dayton contingent. This meant he didn't leave with the larger Ohio group. In the following days, I rarely saw him at the activities the rest of us were involved in at the church and around the city. He and his friends seemed more concerned with turning up than showing up for the family of Mike Brown and the city

of Ferguson. The Hennessey bottles in their rental provided my proof. I remember a friend of ours talking to Marshawn about the way he was showing up on the freedom ride. Marshawn seemed to get the message. He was present in mind and body for the rest of the day.

My interactions with Marshawn in Columbus were completely different than my initial impression. Marshawn was focused. He was a leader and compassionate. He showed up. In the fall, I hosted a teach-in at my university. In addition to a panel comprised of professors from around the university addressing the social, economic, and political impact of the moment, I invited activists from around Columbus to lead conversations about how people can engage in social justice in their communities. The four activists led rotating conversations in four individual rooms. When I approached Marshawn with this idea, he was immediately game. One of my most vivid memories from that night was watching him and two other organizers build with some of the students. I cleaned up and was preparing to go home, and they were still talking. Marshawn stayed in contact with some of the students and continued to build with them. He was committed to people. I cannot think of an action in Columbus I attended where I did not see Marshawn. His smile and hugs were always like a homecoming. Marshawn deeply cared about his community; he organized Feed the Streets just to build with others in his neighborhood.⁶ When I co-organized a #SayHerName action,⁷ Marshawn agreed to speak. He spoke about his responsibility as a masculine person to critique sexism in both his and his friends' behaviors. He stood in solidarity with Femme and Queer folks. Marshawn commanded attention in a way that did not center himself, an attribute I have rarely found in my experiences with cis-hetero men. I liked watching Marshawn. He made me feel proud. He made me feel hopeful.

I remember February 8, 2016 vividly. I remember Marshawn's post. I thought to myself, what's up with Marshawn? I had just seen pictures of him in LA with his mom as his date to the NAACP Image Awards. He looked so proud. *Social media allows us glimpses at people's lives in ways that do not always facilitate engagement.* I was busy that day. I was teaching and preparing for an event. I had invited the Ohio Student Association (OSA), an organization he was affiliated with, to talk to my students about activism.

I wonder how many people saw his status and thought about him but didn't reach out. I wonder how many people ignored it. I wonder if there was anything we could have said or done.

That night Marshawn's name was lovingly evoked repeatedly. Malaya, the OSA representative, and I talked about our mutual love and admiration for

Marshawn. She told me if I was cool with him, I was cool with her. We talked about his new job and plans to move to DC. We talked about how proud we were of him. We exchanged information, and we walked out dancing to Beyoncé's newly released "Formation." We were happy. I came home, and my partner had made my favorite meal. It was a good day. As I sat on the couch scrolling through Facebook, a friend posted an article about a suicide at the statehouse. I read the name, jumped out of my seat, and screamed. No! No! No! Not the man I was just speaking about. I was prepared to watch his dreams come true. Not Marshawn.

Just twenty-four hours after meeting and celebrating Marshawn's work, Malaya and I would gather to mourn the memory of our friend at his candlelight vigil. It didn't seem right. It didn't seem real. *We must love and support each other.* Where did we go wrong? Did we go wrong? How did we not know to support Marshawn? In failing him did we fail ourselves? Organizing spaces are hard. Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. It does something to you to be surrounded by death. To know your time on this earth is limited. To see your friends go. Constantly fighting the seemingly unrelenting oppression that many of us experience in this country due to our identities. Marshawn's death helped start a conversation about care and mental health in our movement. It freed many of us to talk about our own suicidal ideations. We don't often talk about how race, gender, and age impact the mental health of Black men. His final tweet, "Let the record show that I pissed on the state house before i left," served as a fuck you to the state of Ohio, which oppressed and harmed him in so many ways. The same state that killed Tamir Rice and John Crawford. His last breaths were at the statehouse, where so many of us marched and protested together. It made me wonder, is this even worth it? What are we doing this for? They may have cleaned the scene, but Marshawn's blood along with the blood of so many others will always be on Ohio's statehouse.

His death made me feel powerless and angry. I stood in front of my class the day after he died. We were talking about gender identity, and I showed a clip of a young transman who fought for inclusion in his high school and was named prom king, Blake Brockington. He was a leader around social-justice issues in his community. Despite being a leader for many, he committed suicide in 2015 at eighteen years old (see Jeltsen). I told my class that having to fight constantly to be seen as human and fighting against social inequalities takes a toll on you. There are people out there dying in the fight to make this world better for us. Did they know this shit is not a game? Tears fell down my face as I thought of the physical, spiritual, and emotional toll that the fight for equality has on us. I try not to cry in public and definitely not while

teaching. Marshawn's death forced me to be vulnerable in ways I had previously fought. The tender emails I received from several students affirmed that there is strength in vulnerability. Marshawn was a freedom fighter, and he taught us how to fight.

READING EACH OTHER, MIS/READING EACH OTHER

4-5-2016, 11:00 am⁸

"Do you have a hard time asking people for things?"

"I don't really need to ask people for things. I am pretty self-sufficient." That's the response that first came to my head. I didn't respond. I sat with it. This woman stays trying to see me. To read me. Demanding I drop whatever mask I think I am wearing. This annoys me. This makes me uncomfortable. So I fade away.

I met her in the summer of 2015 at the Movement for Black Lives Convening in Cleveland, Ohio. Although the conference was officially over, we had an impromptu action against the Cleveland Police. Afterward, in victory we chanted, "we gon' be alright," in unison with over a hundred Black people. Someone started a healing circle. Others dealt with those who were pepper sprayed. I noticed her boots before I noticed her. Cowboy boots and shorts. She stood out. She was cute and different. As you might already know, I am smoother than freshly churned butter. I went to her and asked her about her boots. This turned into a whole conversation where she gave me the origins of her boots. She got them on a trip to Arizona with her ex-girlfriend. She was quick and witty. We exchanged info, for, you know, community-building, the revolution, and what not. Power to the people.

7-27-2015, Facebook messages

Me: Nice meeting your boots as well as you yesterday. Stay in touch. I'm sure you have great stories about the places the boots been.

Her: Ha! So many stories.

Me: Maybe you should do Boots Tuesday and tell me a new story about you and those boots i lusted after. (I'm good now, I have accepted they are yours :))

And just like that, she started sending me weekly stories. She never told me which ones were fiction. Her stories were great. Moving. Interesting. Insightful. All keeping with the theme of the boots. I found out later that she majored in creative writing. So yes, she had skills.

Eventually, I asked what I could give her in return. I was enjoying the experience of a weekly story so much. I didn't want to take and not give. There is beauty in exchange.

I was going through a Tab love crisis at this point. Feeling like I was fucking up with multiple people. I abruptly ended a relationship that I had been cultivating. You know, Tab shit. She wanted me to write through this. Sometimes she gave me a prompt, sometimes she didn't. I would write about my journey of being a better person.

This went on for almost two months. In retrospect, this impromptu writing exchange/collective was pretty amazing. It gave us both an audience and reason to plan writing into our busy lives. She was always on a plane flying somewhere. I never knew what city she would be in.

Maybe it was one too many ignored questions that made her call me secretive. Maybe I am. I just don't like questions. I like the control of the information. I will tell you everything if you just don't ask.

She told me that sharing was invasive. She wasn't willing to be vulnerable and share aspects of herself when it wasn't reciprocal. She heard my confession that I struggled to be open and honest. She pushed me to know why (more for myself than for her knowledge). She asked did it help when others are open and honest with me? She pushed me on my evasiveness. I answered briefly. And then stopped answering. You know, Tab shit.

In the last two months, I have spoken to her more. Thanks to Snapchat and a new phone that makes texting easier. She mentioned my disappearance early on in our "reunion." I think I briefly addressed it. But we continued. No stories, though. And not many questions from her.

This morning I was reminiscing on Boots Tuesday. Sent her an email inquiring about restarting Boots Tuesday.

She replied, "Dr. Chester, don't you believe in assessment and reflection before repeating a course."

Guess who didn't respond.

She texted me about a favor I asked her to do for my class. I told her never mind. That we can try for another time. Maybe next semester. Some shit about me knowing she had a lot on her plate.

She responded: "Do you have a hard time asking people for things?"

I remembered how much I hated her questions and her ability not only to see me but ask me the questions I hate to answer. She doesn't know me but she knows me. She is a reminder of how transparent I am even when I believe I am performing cryptic and complex. In "Eye to Eye," Audre Lorde tells us, "We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other" (175). My relationship with her reminds me of the importance of staying open and tender with Black women.

M/OTHERING

“Dr. Chester, you are like a mom to me.”

My immediate reaction was to correct her, suggest I could be like a big sister or aunty but not a mother. I told her I wasn't old enough to be a maternal figure to her. I have never had the desire to give birth to another human. Never desired to be called mom. The images of motherhood I have seen were all-encompassing and too sacrificial. The mothers in my life seem to lose themselves in that title. Fatherhood seem more liberating, less life-altering. My issues with the idea of mothering prevented me from hearing what she was saying.

When I listen deeper, I hear her telling me she was being born anew. She was finding the love and nurturing that society told her should have come from her mothers (bio and step), but she was receiving it through me. She reminded me of the revolutionary aspect of mothering. That the care and love I give my students grants them the security to be themselves freely. I thought about Queer mothers and fathers parenting in ways that our biological parents never could and never would. Angie Extravaganza. Willi Ninja. Pepper LaBeija.

She comes to my office and ask me countless questions.

“But why, Dr. Chester?”

“What does this mean?”

I see her trying to reconcile what she has been taught for so long is truth with what she is now learning and what she is now feeling. I see her shifting, becoming comfortable with parts of herself she has always denied. When she leaves, I feel both depleted and renewed. I give her all I have, and she is using it to create the change we so desperately need in the world. I am amazed at what she creates with the nuggets I share with her. She reminds me of the many ways to mother. My teaching allows me to constantly birth radical Queer babies.

There is no revolution without m/others.

THE M/OTHERS

Conversations about the prison industrial complex and the civilization of Black and Brown people routinely center cis-Black men. But what about the women? Absent from the conversation is any discussion about the emotional and financial labor women and Femmes perform for incarcerated men. Women are the ones who come to visitation, put money on the books, write the letters—provide emotional support for those incarcerated. Women are the fastest-growing correctional population in the world (Swavola, Riley, and

Subramanian 6). As Elizabeth Swavola, Kristine Riley, and Ram Subramanian state, “Women often become involved with the justice system as a result of efforts to cope with life challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and significant physical or behavioral health struggles, including those related to past histories of trauma, mental illness, or substance use” (9). Women who are incarcerated have a higher probability of being the primary caretaker of children. Eighty percent of Black women who are criminalized are caretakers (Swavola, Riley, and Subramanian 7). The effects of the criminalization of Black women ripple throughout the community.

Love and support looks like activists bailing out Black mamas for Mother’s Day. It looks like centering Black women in conversations about the prison industrial complex. It looks like demanding the end to the money-bail system. Love and support looks like various communities showering the bailed-out mamas with love, tokens of appreciation, spa days, and dinners. Providing them with resources to fight the systemic inequality they face. Organizer Mary Hooks, who suggested the idea, says, “This action is a love offering, as well as a way to help change the material conditions of black mamas. In the wake of the new neo-fascist government, communities have demanded sanctuary for all people and we have to become sanctuary for each other” (Kaba). The use of crowdfunding allowed many to make a collective offering to the liberation of Black women and Femmes while also starting a larger conversation about bail and pretrial detention reform.

THE RIGHT TO PARENT, THE RIGHT NOT TO PARENT, THE RIGHT TO RAISE OUR CHILDREN

As Alexis Pauline Gumbs has said, “Because we were never meant to survive and here we are creating a world full of love” (23).

In the cold courthouse, sequestered from the courtroom proceedings, Assata and Kamau Sadiki made the intentional decision to create a life. Despite being charged with countless crimes. Despite knowing the challenges that this young Black life would face, they decided to create life. They knew that their community would care and hold this child even as the state sought to destroy Black children and families.

I wonder if they knew this child would be Assata’s path to freedom. Children are the ways that the world begins again and again.

“You can get out of here, if you want to.”

Four-year-old Kakuya directs her mother. Kakuya could see that the bars that contained her mother were not stronger than her mother. “I can’t get through the bars,” Assata told her daughter. Kakuya, the child conceived in a

cold courthouse room, knew that freedom was possible even when her mother didn't.

Listen to the children.

Assata's maternal grandmother came from her home in North Carolina to Clinton Correctional Institute in New Jersey to share her dreams with Assata during a prison visit.

"You're coming home. I know what I'm talking about. Don't ask me to explain anymore, because I can't. I just know you're going to come home and that you're going to be all right."

I think of the visions of freedom Harriet had that enabled her to free hundreds of enslaved Africans. I think of the dreams we wrote for Bresha and other Black girls impacted by the prison industrial complex.

Believe in dreams.

CONCLUSION

My oral surgeon told me that I would need someone to be present throughout the procedure and then take me home. It was difficult realizing that not only could I not use Uber but that I had no one in the city to call. I felt alone. I researched hiring someone to take me and wait for me. I also considered delaying the surgery until I could bring a friend to the area. I casually mentioned my problem to Patrisse while she was in town working on a project with me. Several days later I received a message from a Columbus organizer whom I knew by association. She told me that Patrisse told her I needed support and she was available. She went on to research what my needs would be after the surgery and went grocery shopping for me. As a person who finds it challenging to ask for help, I was overwhelmed by the ways both Patrisse and the organizer showed up for me. Yes, there are many examples of how our actions in movement and non-movement spaces are not reflective of the words spoken in the Assata chant. However, I am sustained and inspired by the ways we move toward love and support.

This essay represents just a small selection of how love and support are embodied in our organizing work and our personal lives. It is just a sample of the ways we intersect and collide in organizing spaces. Our worlds bleed together. We are all closely connected in ways we do not always know or understand. A delicate, intricate web. We are heartbeats away from being a hashtag. I thought I would write about the friendships lost. The rivalries. The infighting. Those whose theory does not always meet their practice. The ways my theory does not always meet my practice. I thought I would write about the hurt I experienced in movement spaces. I find that writing about the love and support I see with and through the movement is more powerful

and life-affirming. The process of remembering and writing alongside the work of sustaining relationships in movement spaces keeps me accountable to the goals of M4BL and to my communities. Moving toward love keeps me encouraged and continues my drive to dream bigger and larger. Telling these stories motivates me to do the self-work needed to love myself and others.

As I write my experiences, I conjure Assata, Bresha, and others because I believe there is so much to learn in the stories of others. Over forty years after Assata's escape, we live in a world where the FBI and the president frame her as a threat to the United States. I consider the price that Assata paid for her freedom. Her inability to return to the land of her birth. I consider the cost of Bresha's and her family's freedom from a violent abuser. The days she spent locked in a juvenile detention center away from school and family—time that she will never get back. Despite the cost, I know it is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is the relationships we form and the love we share—love that lives on in stories—that will sustain us on this journey. We have more to lose than our chains, but liberation is worth it.

NOTES

1. The popular “Assata Taught Me” hoodie has been sold on Teespring.com since 2014. It was designed by Ashley Yates (@BrownBlaze), a key Ferguson activist. In 2015, after a targeted attack, the hoodie was cited as controversial and removed from Teespring's website. The campaign was later reinstated.
2. In 2016, then fourteen-year-old Bresha Meadows killed her abusive father in self-defense. She was subsequently charged with his murder and became the center of a national campaign to free her. The campaign highlighted the ways Black and Brown girls are criminalized and treated in the juvenile justice system.
3. The “we” I speak of is a collective we. The students in my fall 2016 “Black Feminist Thought” class wrote letters to Bresha. The letter-writing activity was a part of a national act/call to send letters and postcards of love and affirmation to Bresha. The website titled “Free Bresha” offers lesson plans and ideas for teach-ins that explain the criminalization of young Black girls. These teach-ins occurred nationwide, and writing our dreams for Bresha was part of the collective organizing that was done around the #FreeBresha campaign.
4. He was convicted again of first-degree murder on November 1, 2017.
5. In 2011, the Palm Beach County switched to video visitation. The change was advertised as a way to reduce contraband and eliminate the public from having to enter a jail environment. The video visitation centers are staffed by civilians and save the Sheriff's office money in terms of personnel. While this change to video visitation seems to be beneficial, it comes at a great cost to those incarcerated and their families. Some states charge families for video visitation, placing a further financial burden on the families of those incarcerated. Video visitations are not equivalent to in-person visitations; often the technology is lacking. Video visitation is becoming increasingly popular in the for-profit prison industrial complex.

6. Feed the Streets is an initiative started by Pursuing Our Dreams (POD). POD is a group started by Marshawn McCarrel in 2013. The group distributes lunches to different parts of Columbus. McCarrel was inspired to start this campaign after he experienced a period of housing instability.
7. *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women* was a report published in May 2015 by the African American Policy Forum to bring attention to the ways police brutality affects Black women/femmes/girls. In conjunction with the release of the report, a national day of action centered on Black women and girls who were victims of state-sanctioned violence. #SayHerName is used in reference to the report and to raise awareness about state-sanctioned violence against Black women.
8. Originally published on April 5, 2016 via the author's blog as "Boot's Tuesday."

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