EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

# Making Our Way Out

*Anne Gray Fischer, Sara Matthiesen, and Marisol LeBrón*

Pat Parker searched for an escape from the state in her 1978 poem "Where Do You Go to Become a Noncitizen?" In one stanza, she wrote:

The A.P.A. finally said all gays aren't ill
Yet ain't no refunds on their psychiatry bills.
A federal judge says MCC is valid—a reality
Yet it won't keep the pigs from hurting you or me.
I wanna resign; I want out.[1]

Parker registers her suspicion of inclusive liberal reforms in the specific context of the postwar United States. She marks the formal end of the pathologization of homosexuality with a reminder that such recognition does not disrupt a for-profit system of health care. And the state's willingness to legitimate queer worship in the Metropolitan Community Church does not offer any protection to live free from police violence. But Parker's desire for noncitizenship transcends US borders: throughout her poem, she indicts Queen Elizabeth, Ford Motors, and the CIA, naming the persecution, abandonment, and exploitation of the people and the land caught in the grooves of global capital. In this way, Parker refuses the superficial incorporation of her Black lesbian identity in service to what Erica R. Edwards calls "the long war on terror" that powers US imperialism.[2] Trapped between the violence of statecraft and the vulnerability of statelessness, Parker writes:

*Radical History Review*
Issue 148 (January 2024) DOI 10.1215/01636545-10846766
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Please lead me to the place
Give my letter to a smiling face
I want to resign; I want out.

What political horizons have guided feminists in their search for a way out of state-sponsored violence? In this issue of *Radical History Review*, readers will find feminists confronting proliferating forms of state harm: dictatorship in Iran, settler colonialism and misogyny in Palestine, economic austerity and the criminalization of reproductive rights in Latin America, sexual policing in South Africa, and incarceration in the United States during the AIDS epidemic, to name a few. These diverse histories of activism illustrate how gender and sexuality—in their historically and culturally specific forms—are consistently mobilized to enact violence and justify abandonment. Taken collectively, these contributions respond to Parker's question—"Where do we go?"—by articulating a key insight of abolition feminism: interpersonal gender-based violence cannot be theorized separately from structural violence.[3] Feminists must oppose both in their struggle toward a horizon of well-being and safety for all.

It is in the *how* of finding a way out, of building the place Parker longs for inside the world we have now, that these histories raise pressing questions about strategies forged from the political horizon of abolition feminism. If abolition feminism is, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes, "about affirming life-building institutions," then this issue asks about the capacity of the state to affirm life, given its structural investments in violence and the strategies available for winning redress from the institutions that exist.[4] In one sense, the massive and multiscaled scope of state violence—religious and racist genocide, medical apartheid, colonial dispossession, global austerity, and capitalist resource extraction that accelerates our climate catastrophe—indexes the immense potential of state infrastructures. Global systems that can accumulate and wield such sprawling powers might instead be used to redistribute resources on that same scale. In another sense, this analysis exposes a fundamental contradiction: how, and why, make demands for the equitable distribution of care, safety, and life on a state that unequally distributes violence, immiseration, and death? Or, as Edwards and Randi Gill-Sadler ask in their essay, "If state violence is articulated as policy that *cares* and protection that *kills*, how do we imagine the care that . . . *radically remakes worlds*?"

This issue, animated by an abolitionist faith that there is an "affirming life-building" place, offers an archive of feminist strategies, practices, and visions that struggle to radically remake worlds from inside this one. When read together, they stake two claims: there are significant limits to the state's capacity to care; and it is necessary to maneuver within those limits in an effort to practice what Heather Berg calls "politics for the meantime."[5] Emily K. Hobson and Mónica A. Jiménez, for example, demonstrate in their contributions that radical care is possible from

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within confinement, and that feminists, in the words of Jiménez, "resist US colonial structures even while being held deeply within them." Hobson's contribution, drawn from a larger project on incarcerated people's organizing against HIV/AIDS inside prisons and jails across the United States, focuses on how organizers used the AIDS Memorial Quilt "both to mourn and to organize." Hobson intervenes in the false dichotomy between caregiving and activism that has pervaded the historiography of AIDS organizing to definitively argue for caregiving as a form of political action. This claim is illustrated by Hobson's astute reading of quilt squares created largely in women's prisons. As HIV/AIDS organizers' work increased in tandem with government officials' neglect, the complexity and quality of their art increased, evidencing how their access to self-expression was hard-won. Incarcerated women in the maximum security wing of the Federal Correctional Institution, Marianna, summarized their organizing efforts with the phrase "While we are in prison, we are still free to love."

The failure of the carceral state to extinguish solidarity is also illustrated by Jiménez's biographical history of her great-aunt Monserrate del Valle, "Titi Monse," a Puerto Rican nationalist arrested in 1950 for attempting to overthrow the US government. "Searching for Monse" explores the difficulty of tracing the life of a possibly illiterate revolutionary who deliberately did not record her political activities to evade government surveillance, and who did not speak of revolution after starting a new life in New York City. But Jiménez "finds" Monse in the Arecibo Women's Jail, where she spent two years before a jury found insufficient evidence to convict her under an antisedition law. During this period, incarcerated nationalists relied on one another and other incarcerated women to survive their conditions of confinement; through their care they also refused "to allow the colonial state to demean them or their dignity."

Beyond prison walls, feminist activists in essays by Kaysha Corinealdi, Romina A. Green Rioja, and Spencer Beswick developed multipronged strategies to build what Beswick describes as "feminist dual power" modeled on Zapatista women's revolutionary work in Chiapas: building grassroots feminist infrastructure to "meet needs outside of the state and capitalism" alongside "genuine democratic institutions . . . that directly challenge the hegemony" of the state. As Corinealdi writes, early twentieth-century Afro-Panamanian communities "survived and sometimes even thrived . . . *in spite of* the state, not because of state interest or investment." In her essay, Corinealdi documents how Felicia Santizo and Sara Sotillo, two Black feminist educators in Panama, mobilized working women to set their own agendas for collective care. They redistributed access to basic social goods, including food and literacy, and they organized for dignified working conditions for teachers. Across more than two decades of organizing, Santizo and Sotillo created flourishing community-based mutual aid programs to "[work] around the state." When they confronted "'prevailing circumstances'"—economic crisis, antifeminist

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backlash, and anticommunist repression—"'which we cannot fight, much less escape,'" they led feminist organizations and teachers unions that issued unrelenting demands for "what the state owed" their communities.

In Green Rioja's essay, the economic austerity of late twentieth-century Argentina catalyzed working-class women to build dual power within nested sites of capital abandonment, criminalization of reproductive health care, and a patriarchal labor movement—organizing that, in turn, transformed the scope and power of the country's feminist movement. During the neoliberal economic crisis of the 1990s, as rising numbers of working-class women joined the paid labor force, they were forced to "choose between having an illegal abortion that could lead to their death or giving birth to a future starving child." Poor Argentine women connected their struggles for control over their reproductive autonomy with their economic conditions, which were ignored or ridiculed by sexist, male-dominated worker organizations: "Do you speak in assembly meetings? Did you decide on your maternity?," one flier for the first assembly of *piqueteras*, or unemployed women, asked. Through this analysis, women consolidated their understanding of themselves as political subjects by creating *espacios de mujeres* (women's spaces), taking over a factory, and fortifying the feminist movement with class-centered politics.

Reproductive autonomy was also central to anarcha-feminist analysis of structural patriarchal and capitalist violence in the 1990s United States. In his essay, Beswick highlights the important contribution that feminists in the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation made to the struggle for abortion access during this period, rejecting law as the terrain of battle and the state as an avenue for the protection of rights. "Our freedom will not come through the passage of yet more laws but through the building of communities strong enough to defend themselves against anti-choice and anti-queer terror, rape, battery, child abuse and police harassment," Love and Ragers wrote. Rather than direct their organization's demands at a state that "would never protect them," Love and Ragers built dual power by physically defending embattled abortion clinics against antiabortion activists' violence—in this way defending the limited right to reproductive health care ostensibly protected in *Roe v. Wade*. Second, the organization empowered women to provide their own "basic gynecological care" through self-help groups and "public cervix announcements" detailing "how to end early term pregnancies safely with a group of friends." Between fighting in the streets and running menstrual extraction tutorials, anarcha-feminists argued that building "women's capacity to care for their own bodies and reproduction materially lessens state power."

If these histories demonstrate the necessity of "working around the state" to make care, bodily autonomy, and worker power possible, essays by Gill-Sadler and Edwards and by Berg argue that radical care is also engendered through community defense. Gill-Sadler and Edwards read Toni Cade Bambara's cultural production, with particular attention to her filmmaking, to explore how Bambara, in concert

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with other Black feminist cultural workers, refused the 1960s turn to "warfare that governance wraps in care." Thinking with Bambara's speculative practice of "living in," Gill-Sadler and Edwards elucidate "a radical Black feminist geometry of power" that exposes state-sponsored care as surveillance and minoritarian upward mobility as capitalist exploitation while imagining "horizontal power that privileges radical collective care." Bambara's work does not make reparative appeals to a shape-shifting state that evades accountability for its continued violence. Rather, she first exposes this violence as a matter of course, as in her 1987 film *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*, which invites viewers to see the 1985 bombing of Philadelphia's MOVE organization as yet another horror manifested from deep legacies of a settler-colonial, white supremacist police state. She then replaces violence and violence-as-care with a narrative of "living in" in her speculative treatment for a never-produced film, *Come as You Are*, in which several characters facing homelessness take over a luxury apartment complex and experiment with "contra-state forms of care and repair."

From Black feminist cultural workers who imagine and represent alternative radical forms of care, the issue turns to sex worker abolitionists working collectively in community defense groups so that they can, in the words of the Clandestine Whores Network, "refuse our deaths." For Berg's interlocutors, appeals to "[humanize . . . ] the sex worker" by resisting racism, transphobia, and whorephobia to win the dubious protections of the state are a dead end—quite literally, since it is the state that "makes sex workers available for death." This structural reality compounds sex workers' vulnerability to individual attacks because "citizens take cues [from the state] about who is available for disposal." It is at this point that the sex workers in Berg's archive linger over the limits of the abolitionist project of transformative justice, which insists on targeting structures, not individuals. As one of Berg's interviewees asks, "What about individual abusers who form a structure?" Contemplating what it means to practice collective defense against rapists and murderers—both police and johns—sex worker abolitionists read "historical resources for navigating tactical ambivalence in the present" to produce "a sex worker theory of transformative justice." Berg's essay explores the question of whether "stop[ping] the war on whores" will require stopping not only violent structures but also the individuals who do the state's work for it.

India Thusi's essay grounds the politics of sexual policing in South Africa and documents how sex workers "manage the risks" of their criminalized labor. Reporting on contemporary campaigns to repeal prostitution laws, Thusi asks what the possibilities for sex worker safety and defense might look like after decriminalization. While Thusi argues that decriminalization would not eliminate the structural harms of economic exploitation and gender-based violence, abolishing criminal sanctions "might be the necessary first step for sex workers to live in a material world where they feel safer and in better control of their lives."

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Anticolonial feminist movements against femicide and authoritarianism further expose how varied systems of inequality threaten interpersonal safety. Essays by Jennifer Mogannam and Manijeh Moradian demonstrate how recent feminist uprisings in Palestine and Iran were ignited by the murders of Israa Gharib and Jina (Mahsa) Amini, respectively. Mogannam demonstrates that in Palestine the nationwide protest organized under the slogan "No free homeland without free women" represents "a twofold challenge to the patriarchal order": a blow against Zionist colonialism carried out through gender-based violence and economic deprivation, and a rejection of social and legal tolerance of femicide in Palestinian society and political culture. The rallying cry of young women in Iran—"Women, Life, Freedom"—mobilized wide swaths of the population who embraced the feminist insight that gender and sexual oppression are, as Moradian points out, "central to the operations and structures of authoritarian power as a whole." Moradian states that the movement in Iran is "the culmination of many decades of organizing," though she also insists that the "feminist understanding of the goals of revolution" is "unprecedented in the history of Iran." Like the Plurinational Meeting of Women, Lesbians, Trans, Bisexual, Intersexual, and Nonbinary in Argentina, in Green Rioja's essay, this feminist understanding includes "the decriminalization of any gender or sexual orientation" and explicitly names the LGTBQIA+ community. Gender and sexual liberation, rather than mere equality, is the demand. Mogannam's essay, in contrast, understands the 2021 emergence of the Palestinian Feminist Collective as a moment in the long history of "Palestinian women's and feminist organizing," and her essay illustrates that "a Palestinian anticolonial feminist politics" has existed since "Western forms of colonialism were imposed on the lands and peoples of Palestine." Indeed, the history offered by Mogannam lays claim to a decidedly decolonial feminism that rejects associations with Western imperialism and accounts "for very real material conditions being felt by women and queer Palestinians," arguing that liberation means freedom from colonialism and patriarchy.

The essays in this issue draw on diverse and innovative archives of feminist strategies for confronting state violence. They move between scales of biography, radical cells, worker collectives, and social movements. In a visual essay, Jessie B. Ramey and Catherine A. Evans illustrate the importance of archives that work at the scale of a single life. The Kipp Dawson Papers at the University of Pittsburgh and over thirty interviews with Dawson amplify lessons drawn from a lifetime of resisting multiple forms of state violence—including the repression and criminalization of organizing efforts. Ramey and Evans approach their history of Dawson, a leader in overlapping movements for justice in the United States since 1960, through the framework of "radical collaboration" that, like Bambara's cultural production, rejects vertical power. Dawson's lifetime of activism in civil rights, antiwar, feminist, gay liberation, labor, and education justice movements exposes a state that distributes violence alongside limited rights. Dawson's antiwar organizing was partly

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sabotaged by the COINTELPRO strategy of sowing divisions within movements, leading to her expulsion from the West Coast Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. She was repeatedly laid off from the mines during her thirteen years as a coal worker and labor organizer, and her career as a public school teacher was marked by numerous efforts to resist massive state divestment from public education. At the same time, her successful fight in the courts to have her queer family recognized by the state legalized gay families in Pennsylvania. Dawson offers lessons for facing down nimble and relentless structural oppressions that echo the radical care articulated in other essays. "When people can experience and feel the beauty of struggling together for one another and leave behind the 'me-myself-and-I' paradigm at the heart of exploitation and isolated misery, all good things are possible."

Gill-Sadler and Edwards characterize those who "live into" horizontal power as "creative combatants," quoting Bambara's foreword to *This Bridge Called My Back*: "women determined to be a danger to our enemies."[6] Drawing on the abolitionist feminist vision of building a life-affirming presence, the feminists featured here have practiced care that endangers the state. Collectively, these histories offer one snapshot of the enduring work of feminists who recognized, as Sotillo reminds us in Corinealdi's essay, "that individual actions are lost to oblivion, while those based in cooperation live on." There are also armies of creative combatants outside the frame, studying, adapting, and creating strategies to be dangerous to the state. Feminism has been a central force in combating state power even when, as Mogannam points out about the Palestinian context, there exist "multidirectional challenges to the concept and language of feminism." The essays in this issue offer a rejoinder to any version of feminism that colludes with imperialism, neoliberalism, global capital, and carcerality in pursuit of equality rather than remaking worlds, or that claims feminism for a singular subject of "woman" rather than gender liberation for all. The anticolonial, abolitionist, anticapitalist feminist maneuvering collected here aims to fuel "the momentum for more feminism" that Green Rioja sees as characteristic of the feminist movement in Argentina. Such momentum holds the promise of not only undermining state power but also making radical, collective care the revolutionary strategy that can build a world from inside this one. As the Clandestine Whores Network puts it in Berg's essay: "Tonight is a great night to refuse our deaths."

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## Notes

1. Enszer, *Complete Works of Pat Parker*, 69–70.
2. Edwards, *Other Side of Terror*, 2.
3. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*
4. Quoted in Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, 51.
5. Berg, *Porn Work*, 9.
6. Bambara, foreword, viii. Bambara credits June Jordan for this formulation.

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