

The Hands of Our Mothers: The Survival of Black Motherhood Through COVID-19 & the Uprisings

By Assata Gonzalez st. Baptiste



Art by Tiffany Montell

The Hands of Our Mothers

have pulled flowered coffee stocks from the ground
and weaved fine silk
spun suffering into adornment on a loom
while rocking children to sleep.

Abstract:

My project sought to examine and understand the historical resilience of Black motherhood and its relation to the life altering pandemic, COVID-19 and racially driven uprisings against systematic oppression; How Black motherhood and resistance through Black motherhood adapted, how it's changed and what new radical resistance through motherhood was conjured in face of the pandemic and race clarity. As an autoethnographic account this research project was centered around my experience of motherhood and communal connections, as well as the experiences of Black mothers and birth workers. The political positioning of Black mothers was considered through essays and poetry written, as well as photos during the lockdowns in relation to the concepts of birth and death, the idea of radical mothering and activism, and the umbrella term of community.

Methodology:

The information used within the work was collected through archival study of classic theoretical texts, anthologies, as well as more contemporary collections of theory surrounding Black motherhood and it's experiences. Testimony has been gathered organically and through scheduled interviews as well. My work will continue to document the significant change in Black motherhood and resistance through Black motherhood as the pandemic continues.

Introduction

“No one knows what is next. You are a mother, you must be strong.”- My mother, Nereida Serrano- Gonzalez

My mother calmly spoke to me over the phone, reassuring me and calming me down despite herself being uprooted by a mystery disease that shook an entire country with fear and would eventually slow the grinding gears of US late-stage capitalism to a halt. When I looked at myself in the mirror I wanted to see Erzulie. The warrior mother, the main Loa or spirit of Haitian Voodoo, the goddess that many owe Haiti's freedom to, believing she allowed the enslaved to free themselves. I was told as a child that the Haitians called to the Mother Goddess, Erzulie Dantor, asking her for strength, for guidance and for unpolluted rage to free themselves from the French, their ruthless captors. They called to her a voice in union and sacrificed an unblemished, black swine for the will and strength the all-mother had to offer, in order to kill their slave masters and live free of the forced labor in the sugarcane and coffee fields. She came to her weary children, giving them strength to slaughter the white men that held whips and shed themselves of the evils of slavery. This was the magic of Black Motherhood my Grandmama introduced to me while I was young and sitting in the Louisiana heat.

Erzulie was motherhood incarnate, all of the strength and none of the weakness or fear that accompanied the Black mother's existence.

On March 13th, 2020 I wanted to be filled with her, to be filled with unshakable strength: but on that day I could not find the fire or the fearlessness associated with her. The day classes

were officially and indefinitely canceled due to the approaching COVID-19 fears and very real cases, I picked up my child from the on-campus daycare and was faced with a threat against our collective safety and the familiar structure we had set up to keep sane. I was filled with questions I couldn't answer; How would I juggle online classes with a curious and still nursing toddler? How could I continue research that I had dedicated sleepless nights and a growing amount of passion to? How much would our lives change?

It reminded me of when I had just given birth and was paralyzed with a diagnosed case of postpartum anxiety despite my overwhelming love for my son. Something made me fear for his life, I began compulsively hovering over his crib as he slept and listening for the heartbeat in our baby monitor as I prepared meals and took care of the household chores in our home. I know this form of politicized anxiety wasn't unique to me, but a common reaction to navigating motherhood and Blackness simultaneously.

This body of work seeks to understand the dynamic identity of the Black mother, my identity, my labor as well as the identities and labors of women I've spoken to understand how they have transformed and continue to transform in the face of restriction, disease and a world undeniably changed. How does the work of women molding the lives of the marginalized continue? As Black women do, particularly Black mothers, we continued. For ourselves, for the lives we guide through a dedicated and hostile system that has made white motherhood, white pregnancy and white children a default and a priority, we continued.



Salem in quarantine

April 2020



Assata & Salem in utero

January 2019

Children Like us,
are born to mothers with two feet in the dirt

I have grown from a tree of women who pass down their inferiority like a pair of antique earrings,
 rust with wear and decision.
 Can the way you hang your head be hereditary?
 Can shackles grow through flesh and bone?
 I, like the women born before me,
 was born to suffer.
 To feel fingers on cheeks after playing with mama's lipstick,
 The shade: Shame Red
 Taste blood in the mouths of women whose bodies you passed through at one time or another wore their
 skin blistering in the sun.
 Salt of the earth,
 Salt in age old wound.

Born to quench the thirst of the congregation,
 To suffer is a birthright.
 Skin the color of earth and bread is regalia.
 To be as warm and as powerful as the sun is in marrow
 The secret to mothering is on my tongue,
 I've shared it with men aching for the love of a woman willing to callous hands at their feet.
 I held their need for god between my fingers in prayer.
 But have yet to hear back from the almighty.

He spread my legs and whispered to me in a language only mothers know.
 Birth is primal,
 It smells like milk.
 Your grandmothers hold your legs up.

Sweetest magnolia bloom,
 Born to more mothers than I,
 Skin dripping with honey.
 Molded from red clay
 And riverbed mud.
 Adorned with fig and
 Shell from the sea

Coffee grains,
Spit and incantations.
Bourbon street soul,
Incan temple is your body.
Sweet magnolia bloom,
The tree that bore us was seeded
And sewn in suffering.
Hands that toiled barren ground
Pulled our mothers from their own bodies
Like berries on vine
For you to suckle sweet milk and taste freedom even if it tastes like lemon and garlic in your mouth.
Sweetest bloom of the tree,
Adorned with sweat and blood and amniotic fluid.
Gold and earth stain your brow.
Born without the birthmark
Of the women before you.

Birth & Death

We have to consider motherhood as something that is intrusively affected by the economic system of slavery; Angela Davis writes in her 1981, *Women, Race, and Class* “Judged by the evolving nineteenth century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women’s roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies.”¹ While white women were thought of as counterparts to white males, Black women were essentially genderless tools of labor, who suffered the same beatings, same whipping as their husbands and sons. In addition to field labor, Black women and their reproductive organs were exploited in order to continue this racialized human trafficking. They were not considered mothers, “they were “breeders”- animals.”² subjected to having their child sold off while raising and nursing the child of their human trafficker.

When we consider how plantation politics molds our societal ideology surrounding race, gender and one’s proximity to motherhood, we see the manifestations and the resistance that comes from an oppressive system. Similarly to enslavement the condition of the child follows the condition of the mother³, by this I mean pre-emancipation Black pregnancy rested on the freedom of the mother- if the mother was enslaved then so was the child. The lack of resources impacting the daily life and communities of our mothers despite their level of education, socioeconomic status or other respectable crutch intended to save one in a capitalist society

¹ Davis, Angela, *Women, Race & Class*

² Davis, Angela, *Women, Race & Class*

³ Davis, Angela, *Women, Race & Class*

ultimately becomes the lack of resources, the polluted air and the oppression of the children we birth.

I spoke to Afro-Latina birth worker Djali Brown-Cepeda who focuses her doula services to BIPOC communities. I had not yet brushed my hair and I held my nursing 18 month old son, Salem, in my arms as she told me over an early morning zoom call that “ Black Lives Matter starts in the womb⁴.”

She works to address the historical lack Black mothers face during pregnancy and the time afterwards. We know this much, Black women are three to four times more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth⁵ compared to white women within the borders of the United States. In *Birthing Justice: Black Women, Pregnancy, and Childbirth*, Griselda Rodrigues proposes: “Being a doula is a labor of love. It requires immense trust in the Divine. Being a doula of color, an Afro-Latina doula in the 21st century, is revolutionary.”

This role, in perhaps the most vulnerable and powerful time in a Black woman’s life becomes revolutionary when you offer to mothers an experience not available in institutions built upon white supremacy and cruel treatment of Black bodies.

Like so many other mothers who died a preventable death Sha’Asia Washington died shortly after giving birth to her daughter via C-section, leaving her partner Juwon as a single father. Washington’s agency was stripped from her while in a fragile state of birthing her child, she was given an epidural despite not asking for one or wanting one. Unfortunately, like the lost lives of children to vigilante justice or police brutality, our communities are all too familiar with the loss of our mothers and infant children. In the face of this loss that happened right here in

⁴ Brown- Cepeda, Djali

⁵ NPR.org

New York's own Woodhull hospital, people reacted in waves of protest outside of the place where Sha'Asia's child was born, where she died without ever having the chance of meeting her.

Djali very explicitly told me this display of collective resistance against the Black maternal mortality rate is like nothing she's ever seen. It is the first time she or I had seen unified rage against the blatant disregard of a Black mother's death. Like the protest sparked by the murder of George Floyd as he called out for his deceased mother, people of the working class were listening and reacting to the documented mistreatment of Black folk.

Washington's untimely death becomes another reason, outside of COVID-19 that all three of Djali's clients have opted to give birth in a birthing center, where birth might be considered more holistically. Reclaiming the ceremony of birth⁶, rejecting the notion of birth as a surgical procedure. "Whether it's one family, ten families, or a hundred families I can provide love, unconditional support and *safety* to." Djali said to me while my child slept in my arms. Black women choosing to use their hands, their presence in support of other mothers of color is a direct resistant act of a system born of slavery. Black pregnancy is inherently radical; A historical attack on the womb of Black mother's through control, rape and experimentation has made our "existence disobedience to the powers that be."⁷ Instead of risking COVID-19 or the possibility of death by neglect, All three of Djali's clients who are experiencing the transformational act of motherhood have began decolonizing birth by reclaiming autonomy of their bodies, control of their births and Birth workers like Djali Brown-Cepeda are by their sides, doing the necessary work for women that look like themselves and their mothers. As Djali put it, "No one cares but us."

⁶ Brown-Cepeda, Djali in conversation

⁷ Williams, Mai'a *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Frontlines*

At the same time the Black maternal and infant mortality crisis continues, we continue to be faced with an invisible danger that lurks in hospitals. COVID-19 became something of a gamble in emergency rooms. My own mother at the age of 68 was suffering from hypertension and refused to go to the closest emergency room because of her fear of contracting the respiratory illness. We can't underestimate how this widespread lack of trust in medical institutions and a prevalent threat has changed pregnancy, birth, and mothering. The oppressed and the colonized must examine all things provided by the dominant culture with a double consciousness or two different ways of understanding⁸ reality. Pregnancy, birth and motherhood are not experiences that escape this double way of viewing life. I'd argue that within the short timeframe of the pandemic working class people of all colors and creeds, to a certain and impermanent degree, have experienced what it is like for America's systems to fail them. Much like racism and the tangible effects of racism, COVID-19 was an unseen threat that changed every aspect of life and how people interact with each other.

⁸Du Bois, W.E.B *The Souls of Black Folk*



Djali Brown-Cepeda

(photo courtesy of

@djalibc)



Sha'Asia Washington

From the family of Sha'Asia Washington

I think of Brooklyn as an extension of Black Mothers

Groomed,

Sharp edges dulled.

What could be done, was done

to make the blood stained streets a jungle gym for children to laugh or to fall from.

And scrape knees.

a mistake was made here or there, here and there.

But there was a whole lotta luv.

I see Brooklyn as a Black child.

Continuing despite of, cause mama said to.

Taken from our hands bit by bit,

But still smellin like us when we down for a visit, sweet.

The Community & The Self

Throughout the diaspora Black mothers, grandmothers and our “other mothers” are the backbone of our communities, ultimately becoming radical protestors against the conditions which their children are the innocent victims of. In the words of Dani McClain; “ Imagine what we could do if we actually were on fertile soil and not in a desert.”⁹

I live in Brownsville with my child, his father and our incredibly fat cat. When the Pandemic kicked into full gear and ravaged through New York the idea of home became intertwined with fear and restriction. The way we organized time and physical space dictated our very tight schedule could no longer apply in our incredibly small apartment and four very big personalities. At first we threw ourselves into projects to not lose ourselves to anxiety as the cases in NYC continued to skyrocket and makeshift morgues were built outside of hospitals.

I continued to work as a community outreach at my much loved job, all of my classes were online and I was juggling a then thirteen month old who had just discovered just how fast he could run. I didn't have enough time. I had decided to cut my son off from nursing cold turkey to catch any spare time I could.

It was when a toddler beat me in a battle of wills that I finally allowed the lockdowns to be a site of resistance. Reclaiming time. Time I had not had before with my son while I was off finishing my degree and working on a career in research, it began to be a powerful way to understand and cope with my family's indefinite change.

⁹ McClain, Dani *We Live for the We: The Political Power of Black Motherhood*

Breastfeeding particularly became a form of resistance. Taking time to nourish my child from my body became a way I opposed a system that continues to scrutinize Black mothers for their “failure” to breastfeed¹⁰, an act slave mothers were prohibited from doing in order to nourish their master’s child¹¹.

Even as I was pregnant, I purposefully and consciously fed my child through my own diet. I avoided what McClain calls “processed, poisoned and packaged”¹² This itself is revolutionary and has become a form of radical mothering, as well as reclamation of diet that has largely been denied to us and our children through food desserts, food insecurity and inaccessibility.

A great deal of my day was dedicated to soaking, preparing and cooking meals with my own two hands that were not only appealing to a toddler but were actually benefiting him. These meals soon became a gesture of love and resistance. Friends and acquaintances would receive dishes of wholesome food, at one point a very good friend of mine dropped off a box of food for me to cook for her that she had received from a local church’s food pantry dedicated to meet the insecurities that existed before COVID but were now amplified.

Other community places of refuge that met hunger proved to be matrilineal in nature. Although I found myself with little to no free time outside of my priorities, I knew my love for growing things with my hands could be put to use at the small community garden I passed by everyday after taking Salem to the park for brief stunts of childhood fun. I began volunteering and helping the volunteers meet the priority of the garden’s coordinator, which was to feed the elderly and the immunocompromised. While pruning and harvesting the coordinator, Ms.

¹⁰ Roberts, Dorothy, *Killing the Black Body*

¹¹ Davis, Angela, *Women, Race and Class*

¹² McClain, Dani, *We Live for the We:*

Graves, a mother herself, would tell us all folktales the way my mother told me when I was a child and hand us herbs that would support our respiratory systems. As Cynthia Dewi's Oka's wrote, I believe in order to understand ourselves as mothers, particularly as Black mother's, we must begin by "decoloniz[ing] our relationship to the earth and other living beings"¹³ (57) This includes understanding where the food we serve our children comes from and continuing sustainable practices that might help to ensure their futures. The community garden became a place where resistance came from communal labor. It became a place where I found intangible sustenance, while harvesting food that filled the homes of the vulnerable and my own home. Oka theorizes on the "the radical potential of home places her contribution into conversation with earlier canonical black feminist work such as bell hooks's meditation on "homeplace" as a sanctuary."¹⁴

In conversation, Djali Cepeda-Brown reminds me that the decolonization of the land of the birth of Black and Brown givers of birth, we must begin by considering and including Indigenous mothers and honoring birthing ceremony.¹⁵

Throughout the pandemic my child and I have spent whole days together, I've watched him grow every single day since that cold day in March. Capitalism requires the exploitation of Black bodies and they are often the bodies of mothers who are overworked, underpaid attempting to beat a system that was not created for us but was built over the bridge called our

¹³ Dewi Oka, Cynthia, *Revolutionary Homemaking*

¹⁴ C. Nash, Jennifer, *The Political Life of Black Motherhood*

¹⁵ Cepeda- Brown, Djali

backs¹⁶. Our labor has and continues to allow America to be a rich nation but does not allow us to dedicate our lives to our own offspring.

We have to be honest. As powerful as Black motherhood can be to both the mother's and child's identity, it can also serve as detrimental to these identities. First generation Bajan scholar and Godmother to my son, Jasmaine Brathwaite spoke to me about this tender duality. "I think it's interesting that you find your experience as a Black mother as healing to yourself, when I am still healing from my own trauma with my Black mother. "

Women have the capability of becoming a vessel of oppression towards their own children, embodying the patriarchy as well as white supremacist ideology. When Jasmaine discusses her childhood experiences, I am reminded of my own traumatic experiences with motherhood. I am convinced my mother being a fair skinned Puerto Rican woman who adopted me as an infant did not understand how to raise her daughter in a Black-affirming way. My mother did her best, raising seven children, six of which were adopted and loved us as her own. She raised me to be strong, value education and to be a fierce mother. While I was young, I didn't understand physical abuse as discipline, nor did it make me want to reform those behaviors. My biological mother is a white woman. My only understanding of a Black mother-figure close to me was my paternal grandmother down south who would use the bible as a way to justify a beating in the name of the name of the lord and respectability.

Jas and I truly became close through the pandemic, locking down with each other in my already packed apartment as we shared these battle stories, that I am all too sure Black women

¹⁶ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *The Bridge Called my Back*

our age share to some degree. Especially tales of belts and flat hands that were ready to enforce strict codes of respectability.

“Parenting from a place of ownership can drive us towards a physically abusive approach to parenthood”¹⁷ and we have to understand it is a reflection of a traumatic past that continues to shape our relationships with our friends, our lovers and our children. I learned the true meaning of patience once isolated in a one bedroom apartment with my rambunctious son, who almost immediately after learning how to walk discovered he could climb each surface in our home and those he couldn't climb he could use the very tips of his toes to snag whatever he could find. Even so, I made the decision to not discipline my defenceless child through violence in any degree, effectively putting an end to my own cycle of intergenerational trauma and trauma bonding, transgressing against a framework of childhood created by an oppressive dominant ideology that Black children must be presentable or beat into submission, that Black children must live in fear, that Black children are not children at all - and should not receive the benefit of a mistake.

In order to cope with the system of slavery and our modern capitalist system, Black women have turned to a communal solution that rejects the neglect of our children economic systems of white supremacy requires; Our children are often left in the care of others or we ourselves are taken under the wing of other Black aunties, grandmamas and mothers who guide and nurture, especially in academia. This cultural adaptation was coined “othermothering”, Seikle Nzinga-Johnson wrote, “mother- ing” takes myriad forms, including the academic

¹⁷ McClain, Dani *We Live for the We: The Political Power of Black Motherhood*

“mothering”¹⁸ There were times and there will be times in the near future that I will be bouncing a crying child on my hip, delivering an academic presentation, while stirring whatever’s on the stove. Jasmine and Mia Walker were women who would walk into my home, take my child from my hip and finish dinner. Salem’s Godmothers truly mother Salem and are willing to put in labor and care for a son that they love but did not birth. This is revolutionary itself. Passed down as a survival mechanism, it becomes a dynamic form of kinship that provides children with guidance and love.

I’ve found myself othermothering other children. We live in a neighborhood where young children largely rely on each other’s supervision, while simultaneously perpetuating violence towards each other. The park has become a sort of escape, where Salem can explore while we continue keeping a safe distance from other’s. Many times the six feet rule is not abided by children and that includes mine. We’ve befriended an older boy, Twelve year old Harlem who considers Salem a little brother and has called me “Ma” in passing. Even though Harlem rolls with grown men this does not negate the fact that he is a child.

Him and my kid are real cool, Salem offers him a little fist bump each time Harlem runs to him yelling “Little brother!”

I find myself sending him out to grab us all dinner, asking Harlem to clean up after himself instead of dumping his plastic waste into the grass beside him and to rethink both homosexual or sexist rhetoric that he often embodies having had learned growing up in a hard place. He has seen more than I had at twelve but is wildly talented and as many Black folk do he uses jokes to buffer his and our collective reality; It’s no secret that there is a mass amount of

¹⁸ Nzinga-Johnson, Seikle *Laboring Positions: Black Women, Mothering and the Academy*

poverty and violence that invades our lives, our communities and forces us women to protect each other and other women's youth. At the same time, Harlem has become a source of protection for Salem.

On a hot day in July, we all found ourselves running from a rogue firework that had nearly took Jasmine's perfectly picked fro out and maimed Salem. The first one to confront the pack of kids laughing at our distress was Harlem.

"You almost hurt my little brother!" He yelled as he chased them with his skateboard wielded.

Kinship becomes a dynamic form of resistance that adapts to both internal and external threats.



Preparing dinner

June 2020



Jasmaine & Salem heading to the skatepark

July 2020



Mia Walker & Salem at the Skatepark

July 2020



Harlem & Salem

August 2020



Mia (left) & Jasmaine (Right)

August 2020



My mother and siblings

2000



A young Jasmaine with the women and girls of her family

2006



Grip tape seen at Betsy Head Skatepark

July 2020

Radical Mothering

“Our children cannot dream unless they live.”¹⁹

Revolutionary Black mothering is defined in many different ways. *Revolutionary Mothering*, an anthology of Black women writers presents the radical idea that mothering is “creating, nurturing, affirming and supporting life²⁰, the life of children that must prove that their life has worth or risk being abandoned by a system and disproportionately affected by its violent byproducts; Hunger, poverty and systematic police slayings are born from a racialized, capitalist agenda. Making motherhood “ a radical act to nurture the lives of those who are not supposed to exist” and are essentially punished for their existence, for wearing hoodies in a residential neighborhood (Trayvon Martin), for playing with a toy gun on a playground (Tamir Rice) and for being in their own homes (Aiyana Jones).²¹

COVID-19 has disrupted the income of working class peoples and significantly affected Black communities. Environmental racism is defined as institutional rules, regulations, policies or government and/or corporate decisions that deliberately target certain communities. The reality and manifestations of environmental racism shapes the adaptations of Black mothers maneuvering the tangible byproducts of systemic racism. Preexisting conditions such as hypertension is a tangible effect of environment racism, medical inaccessibility and bias. The pandemic agitated a historical medical neglect of Black communities and forced mothers to have

¹⁹ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*

²⁰ J. Ross, Loretta, *Revolutionary Mothering*

²¹ J. Ross, Loretta, *Revolutionary Mothering*

to protect their children from yet another expression of racial disparity. The different perspectives of life that working class people have based on race seemed to blur as the nation responded to the clear differences of the Black experience. Particularly after the murder of George Floyd became a viral testimony to the cavalier murder of Black people.

After the murder of George Floyd, I had spent the last few weeks fueled by a cosmic and righteous anger. I've known this almost ancestral anger from the first moment I realized the reality surrounding my Black identity. I grew more and more familiar with it as I became more familiar with the layers of class, race, and gender within late stage capitalism and colonialism that made my life inherently political.

In the 2014 podcast transcript, "We're Trying to Destroy the World", Frank B. Wilderson III explains the politicalization of Blackness. Willderson III explains under our current racialized system of capitalism, Anti-Blackness will shape the "collective unconscious"²². The collective unconscious criminalizes Blackness. This criminalization of identity continuously politicizes the existence of Black folk who are constantly being used as an example of exploitation, even through a pandemic.

I had known this anger that surfaced for most of my adult life but since the back to back deaths of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Nina Pop, and Tony McDade, as well as the growing list of names we will have to remind the world were human beings until society is changed to an extent that it will protect and value Black lives.

I had let this anger take hold of me. It carried me to protest and kept me up at night to sign petitions and email public officials. I thrived in this anger. Not only was I frustrated by the

²² B. Wilderson, Frank *We're Trying to Destroy the World*

cavalier attitude surrounded by Black death, but I was exhausted that I had to reteach allies, including my biological, white mother who had recently decided to understand the politics of Blackness and how deeply Anti-Blackness is ingrained in a system that benefits her. I didn't see how rest or a return to small happiness would support the momentum this moment of clarity had behind it.

I had heard the term "Black joy is revolutionary", I had wholeheartedly believed in the idea. It wasn't until I was in prospect park on Juneteenth as Diana Ross' "It's my House" played on the speaker closest to my small picnics' blanket. I could imagine my Tia's in Puerto Rico, my aunties in New Orleans, and my mother in Florida all two-stepping to the same song, celebrating the same moment. I looked around and witnessed a joy that connected every Black person that laughed from their picnic blanket and bellowed into their hands as someone jumped into a double dutch game. I noticed that despite the fear, fatigue, and frustration that stemmed from living through a global pandemic and an international call to action Black people were still actively seeking joy. People talked over the borders of their picnic blankets and imagined six feet boundary lines created by COVID-19 precautions. We were all at each other's cookout taking part in a revolutionary form of celebration.

Celebration and rage have been tools of Black revolution since the beginning of racialized economic systems. As displaced Africans were moved across the diaspora, celebration continued to endure the system of slavery and the subsequent unequal societies that were shaped by slavery. Communal celebration continued despite restrictions on autonomy and expression; Marriages were performed despite them not holding any legal value in the eyes of pre-abolition law. "Jumping the broom" became a symbol of unity, joy, and celebration. Slave marriage was a

joy that defied the laws placed on Black bodies, children were born of love and named after uncles²³ despite them being labeled as dispensable property.

Wilderson III says in “We’re Trying to Destroy the World.” that what keeps working class folk from actively dismantling systems of oppression is that “Normally people are not radical, normally people are not moving against the system: normally people are just trying to live, to have a bit of romance and to feed their kids.” I’d argue that Black identities experiencing romance, that feeding Black children is a radical act. What I experienced on Juneteenth as groups of individuals celebrated Liberation Day communally was political beings use the simple act of happiness as a political tool. That afternoon prospect park became somebody’s mama's house and we were all the aunties, uncles, cousins and siblings two-stepping like we were in a Soul Train Line. It’s this Black, resilient joy that we experience despite suffering and that we raise our children to know that radically moves against the system.

Mothering becomes a revolutionary act when raising children, particularly male children to nurture Black women. Black women- their labor are expected to be available for everyone at the expense of their autonomy, their happiness and their children. The collective depends on Black womens sacrifice of self for the sake of financial gain, sexual gratification and nurturing internalized trauma of men. Particularly Black men who “need to speak up and tell us why and how their manhood is so threatened that Black women should be the targets of their justifiable rage.”²⁴

²³ Davis, Angela *Women, Race and Class*

²⁴ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*

I mourned when Oluwatoyin Salua was sexually assaulted and murdered at the age of 19 by a Black man offering her a ride directly after she was protesting the murder of a Black man. I realized my fears did not stop at losing my child to an anti-Black system but I feared my son embodying a system that required Black women to suffer and him becoming an oppressor to women that look like his mother and aunties.

Radically and intentionally raising my child to be an intersectional feminist is a way of



using my autonomy and my voice to mold a conscious focal point in our communities through Salem, who might just make our spaces safer for our mothers as they raise revolution in their hands.

An altar at the base of a tree in prospect park dedicated to women who have died at the hands of patriarchal violence featuring the photos of Oluwatoyin & Aiyana

August 2020

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