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IMAGINING FUTURES

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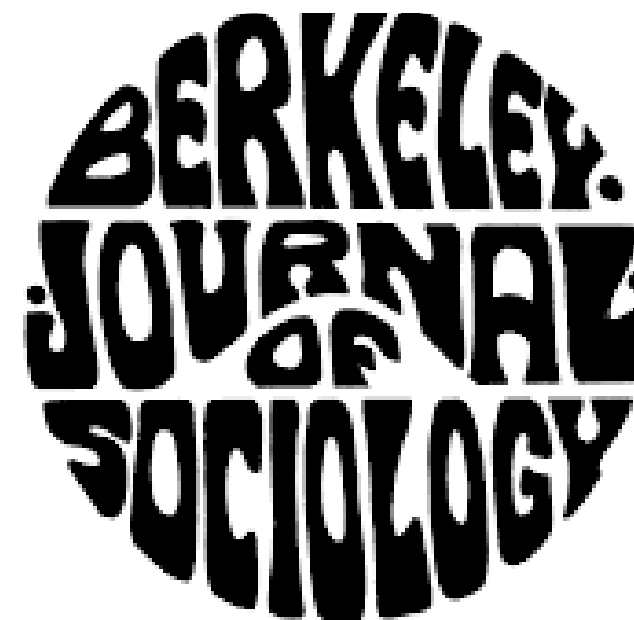
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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS 6
by BJS Editors-in-Chief

في حياتنا IN OUR LIFETIME 10
by Farah Hamouda

WHO'S AFRAID OF A COMUNISTA 12
by Sarah Mayorga

ABOLISHING "FEMINIST JAILS": WHY CAGING
PEOPLE WILL NEVER BE FEMINIST 16
A Case Study of the Proposed "Women's Center for Justice"
in NYC and Movement Efforts
by Isabella Irtifa

DR. MICHELE GOODWIN: 40
HISTORIES, NARRATIVES OF THE BODY, AND THE
POWER OF EMPIRICISM

ARMED SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS 50
AND THE SAFETY OF CALIFORNIA'S BLACK
AND LATINE(X) YOUTH: POLICIES AND
RECOMMENDATIONS
by Larissa Cursorso, D Azarmi, Kelsey Perez, Carlos Flores

LISTEN TO ME BECAUSE I'M A MOM: 71
CONSTRUCTING MOTHERHOOD AS A SOURCE
OF STANDING IN THE GUN DEBATE
by Kaylin Bourdon

FAMILY RECONSIDERED 88
by Mirna Nadia

NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY: A RESEARCHER'S 118
JOURNEY AMIDST POLITICAL TURMOIL AND
SOCIAL SHIFTS
by Istikhar Ali

RISK, INFORMED CONSENT, AND PUBLIC 122
SOCIOLOGY: LESSONS FROM AN ABORTED
ETHNOGRAPHY
by Dylan Gray

HEBA GOWAYED: MIGRATION, THE HUMAN- 128
CENTRIC APPROACH, AND THE FUTURE OF
SOCIOLOGY

NEOLIBERALISM IS DEAD: OR IS IT? 142
by Aabid Firdausi

IMAGINED CRYPTO: SENATORS' 148
MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND PROJECTIONS ON
DIGITAL ASSETS
by Alexandra Bucher

EDITORIAL BOARD 164

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

When we printed our first relaunched volume in 2022, we at the Berkeley Journal of Sociology (BJS) dreamed that our pivot towards more explicitly centering Public Sociology would only build upon the journal's legacy that spans over seven decades. With renewed momentum, commitment, and now also several years of support from our readers and contributors, we are thrilled to continue the BJS's tradition of publishing early-career scholars and graduate students alongside many leading sociologists. We're proud that this volume builds upon our previous issues: Volume 63 - *The Relaunch* (2022) and Volume 64 - *Space and Place at the Margins* (2023). As a graduate student-run journal, we hope to continue pushing the field's boundaries to apply sociological inquiry to emergent political issues, cultural trends, and imaginative futures using the power of diverse media across photo essays, documentaries, atlases, essays, field memos, and interviews. Our orientation seeks to institutionalize a culture of scholarship that not only identifies social problems, but also actively engages the voices and perspectives of the communities that we study and are a part of.

As our journal grows, we continue to reflect on what public sociology looks like, how to practice it, and what it means to us. We remain steadfast that writing, publishing, and engaging is only the beginning. Committed to truly being public, we remain open access and have changed our journal's funding structure to reflect that. We see this effort as one of the ways we can ingrain the practice of public sociology through our subscription model. Building upon a tradition we established last year, our editorial board has grown and continues to extend beyond Berkeley Sociology to include scholars from other social science disciplines across sociology, political science, law, and public health from around the world. This year, our editorial board members hail from the Bay Area, Los Angeles, New York City, Germany, India, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom.

Our theme, *Subverting Paradigms, Imagining Futures*, aims to foreground new ways of seeing our current social systems across racial capitalism, neoliberalism, social policies, and the carceral system, as well as interrogating the various positionalities across activists, researchers, and policymakers. In this volume, we aim to converge on how we can ultimately subvert powerful paradigms to imagine more just futures. Sarah Mayorga reflects on her identity as a Communista in the development of her efforts to upend racial capitalism. Isabella Irtifa challenges the idea of "feminist jails" as part of broader support for prison abolition. Larissa Cursaro, D. Azarmi, Kelsey Perez, and Carlos Flores evaluate alternative policies around armed school resource

officers toward making schools safe places for Black and Latinx youth in California. Through a captivating photo essay, Mirna Nadia peers into the intimate lives of Indonesian women who have formed communities that subvert norms around the heterosexual nuclear family. What can be captured from an individual perspective through fieldwork is also explored in two field memos: Istikhar Ali shows us the complexities that emerge from studying communities amidst political and social change, and Dylan Gray reflects on the risks and lessons learned from an aborted ethnography. Our issue concludes with forays into the present and future of our political economies and digital technologies. Aabid Firdausi assesses the present state of neoliberalism, while Alexandra Bucher brings us into the hearings of the US Senate to scrutinize how the narrow framings around digital assets ultimately hinder their broader regulation.

In our featured interviews with Professors Michele Goodwin and Heba Gowayed, we discuss the importance of centering humanity in our work, as well as the power of empirical evidence to illuminate the injustices of the world. Whether it's centering the human experience of migration, displacement, and borders all around the world, or the legal and personal narratives created around the bodies and identities of women and people of color, we examine how to remain committed to Public Sociology in our fight for justice. We also learn the histories and pathways into academia for both of our interviewees but, perhaps more importantly, imagine together the future of the field and the world we are building towards.

And finally, our issue opens with the painting, *In Our Lifetime*, of a watermelon surrounded by the motif of the keffiyeh from Farah Hamouda, a Palestinian-American graduate student. The watermelon has emerged as a unifying symbol of Palestinian culture, unity, and resistance. In response to Israel's prohibition of the use of political symbols, since 1967 Palestinians have used watermelons as a substitute for their flag and as a symbol of resistance. In the wake of genocide and efforts to censor advocacy for Palestinian liberation, we take seriously our responsibility as a publication outlet and with our platform to actively resist such censorship and instead continue to uplift voices that historically are silenced most. Our commitment to contributing towards a better world, is one of a more just world. We at the BJS stand in solidarity and in power with Palestinian liberation.

This project is a collective labor of love. We are truly touched by the unwavering support from fellow graduate students, faculty, and staff who have supported us in continuing to operate one of the few graduate student-run Sociology journals today. We are especially thankful to our fellow graduate students near and far – at Berkeley, across the United States, and internationally – who have proactively joined our editorial board. None of this would have been possible without their insightful

feedback, ideas, and contributions. We are also grateful to the contributors to this issue who have consistently engaged and developed their work with us. Thank you to Professors Michele Goodwin and Heba Gawayed for taking the time to share with us, and for trusting us, to share the stories of their work and life. Finally, our deepest gratitude to Michael Burawoy for the initial spark to bring the BJS back, breathe new public sociology life into it, and for the encouragement to sustain this work.

Finally, as two women of color and the editors of the BJS, we are humbled by the incredible opportunity and responsibility we have in leading our diverse editorial board, and in creating and contributing to the inclusive intellectual community that we want to see in Sociology. Four years in, we remain as committed as ever to consistently practicing critical and public sociology.

In alignment with our theme this year, we hope this issue is not only engaging to read, but more importantly, aids in subverting paradigms and imagining futures. We hope that the Berkeley Journal of Sociology serves as a sustained invitation to make public sociology truly public.

Warmly,
Tiffany Hamidjaja and Janna Huang
Berkeley Journal of Sociology Editors-in-Chief
May 2024

في حياتنا IN OUR LIFETIME

by FARAH W.
HAMOUDA



Farah Hamouda (she/her) is a Palestinian American, who is committed to Palestinian liberation. Currently, she is pursuing Ph.D. in Sociology with research interests in environmental justice, Middle Eastern studies, political sociology, indigeneity, and state violence. Her recent work at the intersection of environmental sociology and social control uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches, including media analysis. Farah received her B.S. in Sociology and minor in Political Science from the University of Utah in 2021.

WHO'S AFRAID OF A COMUNISTA? by SARAH MAYORGA

Comunista!, my dad exclaims as we are driving down US-1.

We're in Miami, Florida, where I grew up, and someone has cut him off in traffic. My whole family is in the car, a silver Toyota Previa minivan—yes, the one that looked like an egg. My mother is in the passenger seat; my older siblings, Oscar and Carla, are in the captain's chairs; and my younger brothers, Luis and George, and I are in the last row. Luis repeats in a softer voice, comunista, mimicking my dad's lower register. The three of us giggle to ourselves, laughing at the absurdity of Dad's favorite insult. What does being a communist have to do with driving? Dad is so weird, I think, as I look out the window.

As I write in the author's note of my book, *Urban Specters: The Everyday Harms of Racial Capitalism*, I didn't think about capitalism much growing up (2023:xi). All I knew was that it was the moral alternative to the evils of communism. My parents emigrated from Nicaragua in the late 1970s, amidst the Sandinista Revolution. Growing up, the Sandinistas shadowed many discussions of politics in my home. But their role was straightforward—they were evil communists; end of story. At least for my dad. Even the Sandinistas' signature color combo, black and red, were politicized at home. My dad couldn't seem to help himself from commenting when anyone wore them, proclaiming the person in question a communist sympathizer. In jest, but nevertheless, the nuance was lost on me as a child. I avoided the combination for years—I was a good kid who didn't want to be evil! And comunistas were the epitome of evil. Alongside—from my adolescent vantage point—Democrats, feminists, and pro-abortion advocates.

But my dad's politics were not just about left and right, but how to view the world. Much of my upbringing was shaped by fear—love was under that fear, but fear was my dad's primary mode of engagement with the world and how he expressed his love. I can make sense of this now—how living through a political revolution and tumultuous at-home situations shaped his outlook. Dad's fear was born of a particular political and familial context. Yet it was something he brought with him and used to make sense of his life in new places.

In a serendipitous way, writing *Urban Specters* has helped me understand my upbringing better. Based on 117 interviews with residents of two working-class neighborhoods in Cincinnati, Ohio, I trace how residents talked about what was happening in their communities and the harms they faced, connecting these

narratives to the political-economic realities of Cincinnati. Specifically, I identify three relations of racial capitalism—underdevelopment, private property, and policing—that produced residents' experiences.

Despite the very different contexts of *Urban Specters* and my family history, there are uniting threads. Of how fear breeds isolation and exclusionary care in contexts where people feel their safety is at risk. And how this sense of precarity is a function of capitalism—not other people. For instance, residents described how they felt neglected at the hands of the city and how this neglect allowed “trash” to move into their neighborhood, leading to further neighborhood decline. These resident narratives partially recognized the workings of underdevelopment in Cincinnati, whereby the downtown neighborhood was developed at the expense of their own neighborhoods, yet residents also relied on antiblackness and the dehumanization of renters in weaving their stories. In this way, racism helped obscure and facilitate the workings of capitalist development and exploitation.

The dehumanization of the other is what defines the *racial* in racial capitalism. Dehumanization is the creation of moral differences to explain the status differences capitalism produces and to justify the inequality on which capitalism relies. It is foundational to how people under racial capitalism make sense of their world and it is necessary for its functioning. This is what I found in Cincinnati and it's true of my own family. The dehumanization of those who thought differently from us—politically or religiously—helped reorient our attention away from the ways that we were implicated in systems of exploitation and dispossession in that same context. We rarely talked of our family's whiteness, class, and political power. I used to think that my parents' history in Nicaragua had very little to do with me. It felt too far away, in part, because the status they held there did not translate to much in the US besides “fun” facts I could share. But I now see a clearer inheritance—in the given that we would attend college, in our whiteness, and in my Manichean worldview.

As an adult, I have been working on using new ways of thinking and engaging with the world. Ones with more grey, more empathy (towards myself and others), and less fear. Perhaps this is the work of first- and second-gen kids, who are no longer in the life-and-death situations that their parents keep reliving. These new approaches have been painstaking to establish and are ongoing even after a decade-plus of work, but I have unequivocally improved my life. That's perhaps a less acknowledged part of dehumanization: it hurts those who wield it too as it's pretty difficult not to aim it at ourselves. Perhaps that's why we hold onto it—to distract from how afraid we are that we may be rotten on the inside, just as we accuse others of being. But once we start to let go of this hierarchical black-and-white thinking that elevates some at the expense of others, our relationships with the world—and ourselves—changes.

And my work is also changed. I could not have written this version of *Urban Specters* without my own internal reckoning.

When scholars are asked how they came to study a subject, we often discuss the articles or books we read that sparked an interest. Or even personal circumstances that inspired particular research questions. With *Urban Specters*, I certainly have that story. How questions from my first book led me to this second project. But there is another story too—a deeply personal one that usually remains unspoken. Of how I had to heal the parts of me that were afraid of stepping out of line, that held onto black-and-white thinking, that were steeped in classist judgment, to get to a place where I could understand and write about racial capitalism and take the experiences of poor and working-class people seriously without pathology or paternalism.

And that is one thing I find useful about a racial capitalist framework: it can help us refuse both pathologizing and apologist approaches to working-class racism. In *Urban Specters*, I contextualize these ways of seeing the world and push beyond *is this racism?* to answer *what does this racism accomplish? Who benefits, and who is harmed?* These questions take individual experiences seriously while not stopping at ground-level stories, allowing me to thread the line between nuanced understanding and broader theorization.

After a recent talk with my dad about this essay and my new book, he sent me a WhatsApp message with a video of Argentinian singer Mercedes Sosa. He had mentioned her earlier, as evidence of how things can change, his own thinking included. He says he sees more grey in the world than he used to—a point that surprises me and on which I question him. He explains that in his youth he dismissed Sosa as a comunista. Indeed, my sister shared Sosa's music with my dad years ago and he dismissed Sosa as such then. But now her song "Todo Cambia" (Everything Changes) is his "new best song." Todo Cambia was written by Chilean musician, Julio Numhauser, while in exile after the military coup of Augusto Pinochet, but it was popularized by Sosa. It's a beautiful song that speaks of change and the never-ending love one has for their country. Sosa originally recorded it in 1984—the year I was born.

Cambia, todo cambia (Changes, everything changes)

Cambia, todo cambia (Changes, everything changes)

....

Y lo que cambió ayer (And what changed yesterday)

Tendrá que cambiar mañana (Will have to change tomorrow)

Así como cambio yo (Just like I change)

En esta tierra lejana (In this foreign land)

Sí, todo cambia. And yet, the direction in which the world—and we—change is not a given. It is our responsibility to fight for a just future. That fight involves rejecting stories that dehumanize, exclude, and facilitate the exploitation of others. That includes stories we've heard since childhood or that are shared by people we care about. Change may be a given, but we cannot merely wait for it to come.

I hope that one of the takeaways from *Urban Specters* is a deeper understanding of our current world via the stories of Cincinnati residents. While these stories reflect a specific time and place, they present a broader invitation for all of us to challenge our racial capitalist thinking and work collectively to protect one another from harm. And if that hope makes me a comunista? Well, okay.

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Sarah Mayorga is an Associate Professor of Sociology and core faculty in the Latin American, Caribbean, and Latinx Studies Program at Brandeis University. Her research interests include the sociology of race and racism, urban neighborhoods, and Latinx migration. Her books include *Behind the White Picket Fence: Power and Privilege in a Multiethnic Neighborhood* (UNC, 2014) and *Urban Specters: The Everyday Harms of Racial Capitalism* (UNC, 2023). Her forthcoming book, *A Good Reputation: How Residents Fight for An American Barrio* (Chicago, 2024), is co-authored with Elizabeth Korver-Glenn.

ABOLISHING “FEMINIST JAILS”: WHY CAGING PEOPLE WILL NEVER BE FEMINIST

by ISABELLA
IRTIFA

A CASE STUDY OF THE PROPOSED “WOMEN’S CENTER FOR JUSTICE” IN NYC AND MOVEMENT EFFORTS

When one jail closes, it does not mean that another newer, more modern or more “progressive” cage should exist. Reformers have been working towards a proposed “gender-expansive” jail in New York City’s Harlem called the “Women’s Center for Justice.” The proposal purports to have more humane conditions for those incarcerated, which includes family reunification, skill building, and community rooms. The proposal was created by the Columbia Justice Lab, UT-Austin’s Prison and Jail Innovation Lab, and the Women’s Community Justice Association, among others. This comes as Rikers fully closes in 2027, offset by the opening of four more jails – including a borough-based jail in Queens – at a total cost of \$8.7 billion (Haag 2019). As a part of the borough-based jail proposal, the city plans to create a new facility for women and gender-expansive people in the larger men’s jail in Kew Gardens, Queens (NYC: A Roadmap to Closing Rikers n.d.). As an alternative for gender expansive people, the proposed “Women’s Center for Justice” would convert the former Lincoln Correctional Facility, a no longer functioning Harlem jail, into a women’s jail, with advocates claiming it to be “feminist” and based in trauma-informed care (Columbia Justice Lab 2022). Prison abolitionists are fighting back against this proposal, arguing that no jail is feminist. Anti-carceral feminists argue that the prison industrial complex harms women and trans people, low-income communities, and communities of color. Expanding and building new jails – like the proposed Women’s Center for Justice – means criminalizing and incarcerating more people, causing further harm and abuse in vulnerable communities. As abolitionists see it, feminism demands the right to live free from violence, and incarceration is an inherently violent institution that relies on racialized policing, caging, and deprivation of rights.

Anti-carceral advocates argue that the foundational principles behind these approaches ignores the systemic, anti-Black, and criminalizing reality of the punishment industrial complex. Ultimately, investment in more jails requires diverting funding that could have been invested in non-carceral resources such as education, wellness, and mental health programs that would actually benefit women and trans people. Locking people in cages, no matter how “humane,” cannot be seen as a means of justice or healing. Tracing genealogies of women’s jails in the United States, this essay will demonstrate the importance of ending punitive, carceral punishment, and present imaginings of more just communities of care.

Looking at this jail proposal compared to other proposals is especially necessary because it purports to be progressive and feminist. The proposal itself states that “there should be an accessible, humane center that is separate from men and reduces harm, rather than exacerbating it . . . Jails are almost always designed with men in mind” (Columbia Justice Lab 2022:3). However, as history shows us, no cage – even conceived of with gender-expansive people “in mind” – has actually been progressive because caging in itself is not trauma-informed. The proposal blatantly ignores failed and violent histories of fraudulent gender-expansive jail claims that have instead increased gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault of prisoners. Looking at this proposal necessitates learning from histories of brutality against incarcerated people and calls on all of us to ensure that the focus should be on closing jails rather than opening more. If a jail is built, it will be filled. The only way to realize the goal of supporting people affected by violence is to invest in trauma-informed approaches – those that come from ensuring people can live in freedom and dignity, and have the resources they need in the community to succeed and thrive.

This essay utilizes historical methodologies, analyzes primary text of the Columbia Justice Lab’s Women’s Center jail proposal, and reviews strategies of dismantling jails/prisons as a feminist project. Critically looking at literature on harms jails cause to communities, this essay argues that jails themselves operate as a borderland for the maintenance of a white supremacist social order and deprives people of their freedoms. As a second-generation immigrant and family member of people affected by the prison industrial complex and racialized policing, I look to expose how systems of criminalization and incarceration reproduce inequities and harm in our communities. This essay will also interrogate the oxymoron a “women’s jail” presents by deeming itself trauma-informed, when incarceration reinforces intergenerational psychological, physical, and spiritual harm. Referring to past “Women’s Jails” efforts, this essay draws on lessons learned through New York City’s

most prominent symbol of women's caging – Rosie's and the House of Detention for Women. This essay will also explore harms of caging as punishment, carceral feminism versus abolition agendas, and ultimately why caging people will not ever be feminist.

A Brief History of "Women's Jails"

The New York Women's House of Detention in Greenwich Village is one of the most well-known examples of women's caging. Existing from 1932-1974, the House of Detention for Women was created with the intention of being responsive to incarcerated women's needs and was supported by so-called progressive women's activists and suffragists. In reality, the center reproduced violent structures of racism, misogyny, and class violence (Cunniff 2022). Given this history, those supporting and conceiving of the center did not interrogate how carceral punishment in general lead to torture and further harm to those incarcerated. As Cunniff (2022) writes, the argument "was not to 'free them all'; instead, the progressive demand was to build 'better' cages. The House of Detention incarcerated largely Black and working-class people who were arrested on artificial charges, including that of protesting the Vietnam War, activism, drug possession, sex work, and other acts deemed 'crimes.' The House of Detention was right next to city streets, so prisoners could communicate about the terrible conditions the inside to people on the street who would listen (with pedestrians sometimes even advocating for them) (Cunniff 2022). Prisoners in the House of Detention included well known activists such as Andrea Dworkin, and abolitionists Angela Davis and Afeni Shakur. Ultimately, while conceived to be a more "humane" facility, the conditions of the prison were abysmal.

The Women's House of Detention became infamous for its abuses. This is because it was not just used to house women detained before trial, as intended, but was also a vessel to incarcerate those who had been sentenced from Blackwell Island, which was a facility plagued by smallpox (Cunniff 2022). Other major concerns include accounts of overcrowding, disease, health neglect, sexual assault of prisoners by doctors and guards, forced medication, and frequent rebellions due to inhumane conditions (Cunniff 2022). Andrea Dworkin, jailed in the Women's House of Detention as a freshman in college for protesting the Vietnam War, is featured in the book *Hellhole*, which details the horrible treatment Dworkin faced and the conditions of life in the prison (Harris 1967). Dworkin spent "4 days and nights

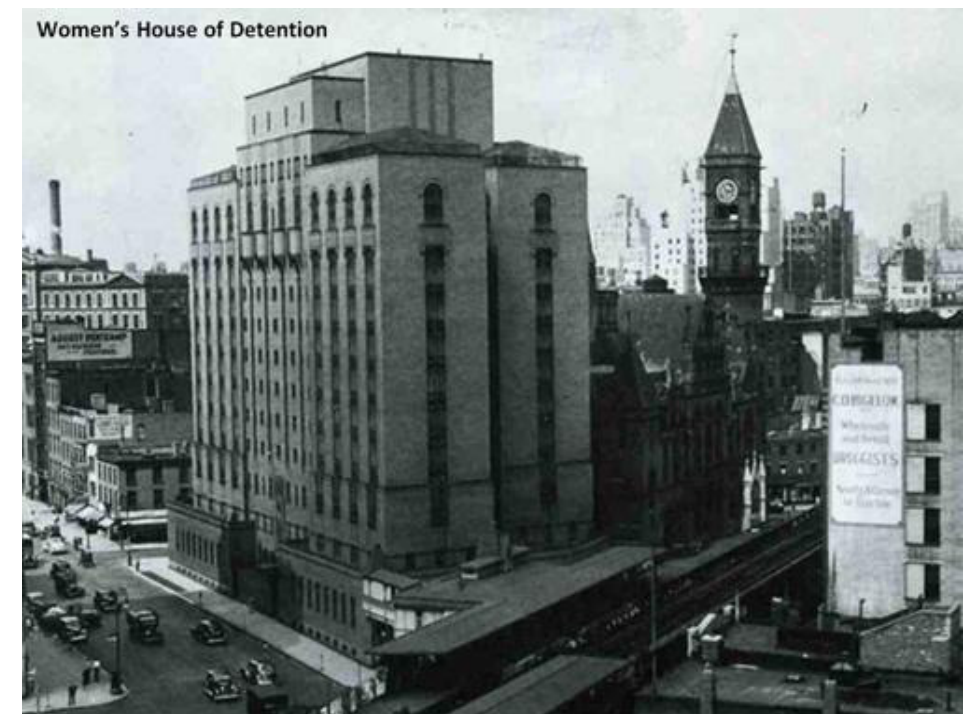


Figure 1. Photo of the House of Detention (Village Preservation 2018)

in the filth and terror of that jail" (Stevens 1975). Dworkin describes being sent to be examined for venereal disease, but was then forced to have a doctor examine her breasts and stomach, and a prison doctor inserting his hands into both her rectum and vagina, "brutally applying" force (Harris 1967:16). In addition, Dworkin describes the unsanitary facilities with mice running throughout the cells. Dworkin's testimony about this experience is what helped lead to the closure of the House of Detention. Angela Davis also describes accounts of people incarcerated being drugged with their meals. She writes:

Later I learned that these women received Thorazine with their meals each day and, even if they were completely sane, the tranquilizers would always make them uncommunicative and detached from their surroundings. After a few hours of watching them gaze silently into space, I felt as though I had been thrown into a nightmare (Gruen and Marceau 2022:305).

The Correctional Institution for Women (CIFW) in Rikers later opened in 1971 to address the abuses presented by the Women's House of Detention. However, CIFW

also became a major concern due to overcrowding, lack of medical care provisions, and assault (Shanahan 2022). Further proposals were developed to create a new, “better and improved” women’s jail with larger capacity, all of which actualized to similar horrific conditions.

In 1988, less than 20 years after CIFW opened, the Rose M. Singer Center (“Rosie’s”) opened in the Bronx. Rosie’s had a capacity of over 1,000 people and included a nursery for pregnant incarcerated soon-to-be mothers (Shanahan 2022; Cunniff 2022). Programs at the facility included or covered job training, gardening, sewing, and cooking. According to Singer, the woman after whom the center was named, it was meant to “be a place of hope and renewal” (Correction News 1988). Rosie’s was anything but a place of hope and renewal, and became known as a site of torture.

Rosie’s is a site of patriarchal violence, medical neglect, and mass death. Rosie’s is a “gender responsive” and “trauma informed” jail, but incarcerated people in the jail experience sexual violence, physical torment, and death. Some accounts have detailed invasive gynecologists who convinced patients they had cancer and unnecessarily cut into their cervix; people being denied the medication they have relied on for years; negligent medical response leading to death; and lack of support for drug withdrawal (Eichelberger 2015; McMillan 2015).



Figure 2. Photo of the Rose M. Singer Center
(Ransom and Bromwich, New York Times, 2022)

Campaigns to create new women’s jails have made promises of better conditions. For example, the Women’s Community Justice Association created a campaign called #BeyondRosies. In an effort to gain support of pro-carceral progressives, the campaign drew on the failings of Rosie’s to argue that the Women’s Center for Justice would be different (Cunniff 2022). The campaign lauded the Women’s Center for Justice in Harlem as a new vision for gender-expansive jail initiatives. However, as we see with previous attempted women’s jail and gender-expansive jail initiatives, these have all amounted to be torturous, inhumane, and not trauma-informed.

The treatment of people in prisons and in these gender-expansive jails are rooted in a racist, classist social order underpinning U.S. society. Samah Sisay, a lawyer and organizer, argues that imprisonment relies on histories of “sexual violence used to ‘discipline’ people on plantations and reservations, to the lynching of Black people criminalized for deviating from white supremacy’s gender and sexual politic edicts, to the historic and ongoing sterilization of people trapped in detention centers and prisons” (Sisay 2022). The proposal for the Harlem gender-expansive jail is more of the horrific status quo regarding the histories of gender-based violence. No matter how new jails are framed, history demonstrates that these abuses have not and will not be solved by the implementation of newer cages, and why we must embrace an abolitionist perspective.

Carceral Feminism v. Abolition

Carceral feminism fails to acknowledge how the prison industrial complex and criminal punishment bureaucracy hurt BIPOC and LGBTQI people. It ignores the increased intersection of policing, racialized surveillance, and state violence that leaves certain groups more vulnerable to abuse (Britton 2020). Carceral feminism in particular advocates for lengthening prison sentences that deal with feminist and gender issues, such as rape, and the belief that harsher sentences will help to solve these issues (Bernstein 2012). As seen with Rosie’s and the Center for Detention, longer sentencing and expansive jail processes do not benefit those it seeks to serve, and instead cause further harm and trauma.

Abolition feminism, on the other hand, seeks a world beyond policing and prisons. It also focuses on building realities outside of the systems we currently have, as these systems are built on racialized capitalism and policing that target Black, Indigenous, people of color, queer and gender-expansive people. Such targeted policing is evidenced by the fact that imprisonment rates are much higher for women of color than white women. In 2021, the imprisonment rate for Black women (62 per 100,000) was 1.6 times the rate of imprisonment for white women

(38 per 100,000) (Monazzam and Budd 2023). We can see the same disparity in poverty rates, with the Census reporting Black individuals making up 13.5% of the population but 20.1% of the population in poverty in 2022 overall (United States Census Bureau 2023). Hispanics are also overrepresented in poverty with a ratio of 1.5 (United States Census Bureau 2023). Many of the communities living in poverty have also faced heightened policing, sentencing, and prosecution. The Sentencing Project in 2023 reported that more than two-thirds of people who are currently serving life sentences are people of color. Similarly, 55% of people serving life sentences without the possibility of parole are Black (Monazzam and Budd 2023).

Such racialized criminalization extends into education through the presence of police in schools. A 2014 investigation on discipline in schools led to the Department of Education and Justice to acknowledge that there are substantial racial disparities in discipline in schools that are not due to more frequent misbehavior by students of color, but likely due to racial bias (U.S. Department of Justice & Office for Civil Rights 2014). Another study found that if an individual is suspended between grades 7-12, the odds of incarceration in young adulthood increase by 288%, with Black individuals having significantly increased odds of incarceration compared to white people (Hemez, Brent, Mowen 2019). Such school-to-prison and abuse-to-prison pipelines result in cruel and intergenerational consequences for people living in poverty (Edelman 2019). Such consequences are detailed in a later section of this paper. Abolitionists argue that it is interconnected apparatuses like the school-to-prison pipeline and policing of low-income communities that lead to higher imprisonment for communities of color. If more jails and prisons are built – even ones that say they are gender-expansive and trauma-informed – they will be filled. Such logic then justifies the state's increase in funding for policing that ultimately targets communities of color.

As Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues, abolition asks us to "look at the political category of crime and . . . [the need] to take it apart" (Intercepted 2020). The construction of "crime" itself must be examined for how it specifically punishes people who deviate from the white supremacist, settler, patriarchal norm (Hernández 2017). Beth Richie (2012) furthers this analysis by focusing on the ways Black women are especially targeted by the criminal legal system as a result of patriarchal violence and racialized oppression. To truly work towards a more just and liberatory future, goals of abolition must be intersectional. Abolitionists seek to embody transformative justice as practice and solve society's issues that would render carceral solutions unnecessary. Abolition requires a deeper look at the structural conditions that lead people to act in harmful ways to one another, and necessitates an elimination of those inequalities to ultimately end the potential of perpetrating such harm (Kaba

2021). Abolitionists believe that systems of punishment are deeply racist and misogynistic, and need to be dismantled to end the root causes of violence (Kaba and Ritchie 2022).

Abolition also acknowledges the difference between "reformist reforms" versus abolitionist steps (Critical Resistance 2022). Reformist thinkers, such as those who support women's jails, choose to "reform" the conditions in which people are still caged. Critical Resistance, an abolitionist organization, developed action guides to help discern whether a project is a "reformist reform" or an abolitionist, decarceral step toward ending imprisonment. In it, they ask: does the project reduce the number of people imprisoned or under another form of state control; reduce the reach of jails/prisons in our everyday lives; create resources and infrastructure that do not rely on police/prison guards; strengthen capacities to address harm that are rooted in community accountability (Critical Resistance 2022). In identifying a reformist reform, Critical Resistance argues that any new prison built will be filled, ultimately leading to the expansion of incarceration and more caging, even if the project was meant to improve conditions of those incarcerated. Resources that would be going towards "reformist reforms" must instead be utilized for projects that aim to build up community, end poverty and homelessness, and imagine futures outside of systems of degradation that impoverish communities.

Abolition focuses on building, creating, and imagining alternatives to incarceration. As Angela Davis (2003) writes after her abuse from incarceration:

[R]ather than try to imagine one single alternative to the existing system of incarceration, we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformations of many aspects of our society. Alternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis, lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition.

To actualize abolition, transformative justice is an alternate approach to addressing harm. At its foundation, transformative justice works to counter violence while minimizing harm and ultimately actualizing justice for all parties (Mingus 2019; Dixon 2020; maree brown 2015). Transformative justice often does not rely on the state (police, prisons, criminal legal system), as the state is a violent, anti-Black, capitalist, and racialized institution that puts forth proposals that negatively target BIPOC and queer communities. State responses, as we have seen, often include tactics such as gender-expansive jails/prisons, even though they reinforce and perpetuate violence, both behind and outside of bars. Additionally, these strategies

perpetuate violence, both behind and outside of bars. Additionally, these strategies require sustained commitment and long-term organizing, rather than simply jailing someone. This means that solutions to harm are rooted in transformative justice – where the person who perpetrated the harm is supported to ensure that the harm does not happen again. This is a tactic of healing, dignity and care.

It is important to provide space for critiques of abolition. Those who believe that reforms are best suited to foster accountability and “justice” to individuals wronged argue that an end to carceral institutions does not center survivors of harm, or much less victim’s families who must heal after the harm has been done. Such is the mentality: ‘If they are locked away, my family will have justice and my community will be safer.’ This view argues that justice would be achieved from locking the perpetrator up and throwing away the key. However, it is important to look at the root causes of violence, the inequalities in our communities that may lead to “violent” behavior. Consider someone who is trying to provide for their family, or themselves, desperate to put food on the table, and how the reality of not making enough money to live can cause someone to resort to violent actions like robbery. Consider perhaps another poignant example of someone who commits harm due to a mental health episode, but they never had the monetary means to receive health support, medication, or care. Abolition, rather than reforms, prioritizes solutions that would eliminate causes of inequality and self-perpetuating violence.

Ultimately, locking people in a cage causes further harm, such as increased stress, lashing out which can lead to harm inflicted towards another person, and a complete loss of autonomy. Families and communities of those incarcerated are also harmed, which can lead to further violence. None of the conditions people experience in cages are consistent with the long-term healing of the individual and community, given the destructive consequences of imprisonment on mental health. Abolition argues that resources that go into sustaining prisons and their expansion should instead go towards funding community services like schools, mental health initiatives, after-school groups, and other programs that are conducive to the process of healing and are necessary to eliminate inequality that leads to violence. To further understand the importance of abolition, and how prisons are not conducive to healing or “rehabilitation,” it is necessary to delve deeper into the harms of incarceration as a racialized, gendered, and classed project.

Harms of Incarceration

Mass incarceration is a product of white supremacist institutionalized mechanisms of policing, surveillance, bond, and other targeted initiatives. Sandra Smith, a peer programming manager working with currently incarcerated people talks about her own experience in prison: “There is a specific trauma related to being incarcerated that is pretty much indescribable . . . First of all, it’s losing your liberties—losing the ability to do anything on your own. And you’re constantly being yelled at. You’re constantly being demeaned” (Huff 2022). It is critical to recognize that the realities of incarceration, regardless of how “humane” the facility purports to be, have lasting psychological and intergenerational effects that perpetuate cycles of trauma and abuse. Incarceration has major negative impacts on one’s ability to find stable employment, secure safe housing after release, and sustain connections with loved ones. Imprisonment has societal consequences: communities affected by incarceration are seen as being more “violent,” fueling greater disparities in state funding when, in actuality, the community is highly policed and therefore people are forcibly ensnared in the prison system. Incarceration also disproportionately targets people who are Black, Indigenous, queer, gender non-conforming, trans, or disabled. In 2021, The Sentencing Project published a report stating that Black people in the U.S. are imprisoned at five times the rate of white people. Similar disparities can be seen with people with disabilities, where compared to being 15% of the U.S. population, 40% of people in prison have a disability (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.).

By its very nature, incarceration has the capacity to break someone’s spirit due to its imposed hierarchy. This can also lead to incarcerated people rebelling or becoming aggressive to themselves or one another. Angela Davis (1974) writes, “Jails and prisons are designed to break human beings, to convert the population into specimens in a zoo obedient to our keepers, but dangerous to each other.” Davis’ (1974) argument examines the relationship of people incarcerated to their peers, the penal system, and themselves. Being put in a cage leads to feelings of worthlessness, where people are in a “zoo” manipulated and abused by their “keepers.” Incarceration is hierarchical and therefore abusive in nature with the ultimate goal not of healing or respect, but of breaking spirits. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes such a system as “incapacitation,” where people can be stopped from taking action inside prison walls that would allow them to feel autonomous (Intercepted 2020).

Imprisonment separates people from their community and loved ones, forcing them to feel isolated. In 2015, Goomany and Dickinson (2015) conducted research on the impact of incarceration on mental health, and isolation was identified as a

major stressor leading to severe psychological distress. They found that even when receiving visits from family members while incarcerated, the environment of incarceration makes it harder to connect and feel like a whole person (Goomany and Dickinson 2015). Separation from families, loved ones, communities, and the outside world while incarcerated isolates people, disrupting social structures that are vital to live a fulfilling life. In discussing the consequences of border politics on people's lived realities, Harsha Walia writes (2022), "Borders destroy communal social organization by operating through the logic of dispossession, capture, containment, and immobility." Such a description of borders amplifies the entanglement Angela Davis and Gina Dent (2001) identify – that "the prison itself is a border." Such regulations, isolation, and containment have a major impact on the relationship incarcerated people have with their families.

Parental separation from children is especially violent and isolating. An article in Behavioral Sciences & the Law argues, "Separation from children is one of the most stressful conditions of incarceration for women and is associated with feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear of losing mother-child attachment" (Lindquist and Lindquist 1998). Another study conducted by Poehlmann (2005:353) found that "most mothers described an intense focus on feelings of distress, depression, or guilt." One of her participants was a mother, who said, "All I'd do was cry. It is horrible being away from your kids, especially when they the only people who care for you" (Poehlmann 2005:353). In the same study, another participant said, "I was very hurt, depressed, crying constantly, and worried" (Poehlmann 2005:354). Poehlmann's (2005:353) study found that approximately six percent of the mothers featured said that they were suicidal early in incarceration. Regardless of how "humane" a jail or carceral apparatus claims to be, the very structure of jails can have severe mental health and physical impacts. In addition, poor conditions and lack of appropriate medical care and responsiveness can cause additional suffering (World Health Organization 2020). The mental, physical, and psychological horrors discussed describe the reality of imprisonment, including in institutions that have previously claimed to be "feminist," "gender-expansive," and "trauma informed."

No jail or proposed agenda can provide, especially in a punitive carceral context, the resources needed to serve communities and people deeply impacted by separation from loved ones and beloved activities. Prisons and jails are ultimately unfree places that deprive people of their freedom of movement and ability to live with dignity. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reports that a "third of women in state prison, a sixth in federal prison, and a quarter in jail had been raped before their sentence" (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999). The criminalization of vulnerable groups as targets for

incarceration is highly gendered, sexed, ableist, and racist. It is especially important to note that policing and surveillance targets Black and brown people, and the proposed Women's Jail in Harlem would further increase harm on communities of color, poor communities, and gender marginalized groups. As Price, the co-executive director of Grassroots Leadership argues, "It doesn't matter what name you give it...[cages are] a dehumanizing place to put people" (Tamar 2022). Due to the harms of caging to human life, no one should be incarcerated, especially in any place that falsely purports that a new system of caging (i.e. gender-expansive jails/prisons) will be any different.

The New Harlem "Feminist Jail"

The Columbia Justice Lab, sponsor of the Women's Center for Justice, published a proposal that outlines the goals of the Center, its implementation, and how it differs from gender-expansive centers of the past. The proposal was made in response to the call to close the Rose M. Singer Center (Rosie's) on Rikers and place women and gender-expansive people in Kew Gardens, a facility that would be a part of the men's jail. The proposal argues that gender-expansive groups would be safer at the Women's Center for Justice, which is made "with them in mind" (Columbia Justice Lab 2022:3). However, a cage ever being designed with human needs and dignity "in mind" is a fallacy. If a jail is built, it will be filled, which leads to higher rates of incarceration specifically for gender-expansive people. The proposal is framed as a reform that offers a safer space for gender-expansive groups, and discusses how the center will be led by "effective strategies to create a safe, calming, and rehabilitative center" (Columbia Justice Lab 2022:15). However, a cage ever being designed with human needs and dignity "in mind" is a fallacy. If a jail is built, it will be filled, which leads to higher rates of incarceration specifically for gender-expansive people. The proposal is framed as a reform that offers a safer space for gender-expansive groups, and discusses how the center will be led by "effective strategies to create a safe, calming, and rehabilitative center" (Columbia Justice Lab 2022:15).

- **Dignity and Respect** – the center must be a place that respects the dignity, inherent worth, and potential of each individual who lives and works there; a person who is incarcerated should not be subjected to conditions that have the effect of humiliating or demeaning them, or that otherwise communicate a message of disrespect
- **Normalization** – to the extent possible, life inside the center should resemble positive aspects of life in the outside world; the center should be as non-institutional as possible in design, operations, and programming, and should facilitate community contact and support as part of daily operations
- **Safety** – the center should protect the psychological and physical safety of both residents and staff, and should promote nonviolence in all aspects of operations

Figure 3. Photo from the "Women's Center for Justice" Proposal (p. 15, 2022)

Many of the foundations of the center read as an oxymoron. Under “dignity and respect,” it states that no person should be subject to the effect of “humiliating or demeaning” treatment. However, punishment in its conception, the notion that no one can have freedom of movement, is demeaning. This would also entail that the center would need to hire “feminist guards” that are all specifically trained in gender care. As we learn from Rosie’s, the medical neglect and torture that took place highlights how these centers do not provide proper care in practice if the system one is caged in is based on punitive measures. The very nature of having a jail entails prisoners and guards, leading to hierarchies, power differentials, and cycles of violence (Foucault 1995). Additionally, the proposal reads that safety is the highest priority with an emphasis on promoting nonviolence in the facility. However, it is imperative to remember that prisons and jails, and any carceral substitute, are violent institutions that rely on taking individual freedoms away as punishment. If the center were to be a truly safe and dignified space, it would prioritize a transformative justice approach and not rely on carcerality.

The proposed Women’s Center for Justice is not fundamentally different from existing women’s jails despite the proposal’s insistence on its innovation. Previous proposals with similar plans purported to have common areas, windows, and access to the outside world, but continued to have widespread abuses and create trauma for prisoners. The Center for Justice goes as far as to say that they aim to adopt the “least restrictive approach” where people are not “housed in a more secure setting than is absolutely necessary” (Columbia Justice Lab 2022:15). Here, it is evident that the center is glorifying their plans and not recognizing that incarceration itself is restrictive. Again, those incarcerated are unable to leave which is fundamentally in opposition to a “least restrictive approach” (Columbia Justice Lab 2022:15). It is natural for people when their freedoms are taken away to feel scared and defensive, and protect their own safety as they may be re-exposed to trauma. Using restrictive approaches when people incarcerated are not obedient to those in charge is a weapon against the people incarcerated and is ultimately punitive. Similarly, the claim that the center is “trauma informed” ignores the reality that the very institution of a jail can cause further trauma and suffering to those incarcerated.

The proposal further details the differences between the Singer center, the current Kew Gardens plan provided by the city, and the new proposal for the Women’s Center for Justice. These plans include details on housing areas, staffing, programming, operational spaces, and more. Those that support the Women’s Center say the facility will look and feel more domestic with less surveillance from guards. Columbia Justice Lab argues that this will be especially important in promoting the dignity and well-being of those incarcerated. What is particularly

concerning about this is the overt glorification of the incarceration facility. The stakes of the proposal are dire: if the Center were to be built, it would ignore histories of abuses against gender-expansive groups and the brutality underpinning the very conception of jails/prisons. What the Center’s proposal presents is not a desire to have people live with freedom, but instead is a demand for better caging systems. Such rhetoric perpetuates the prison industrial complex’s far-reaching harms to the most vulnerable communities.

- **Least Restrictive Approach** – the center should not be overly secure, nor should anyone be housed in a more secure setting than is absolutely necessary for that person’s individual circumstances; freedom of movement should be encouraged
- **Rehabilitative** – the center should be focused on rehabilitation and successful re-entry and should avoid any features perceived or intended to be punitive
- **Family and Community Centered** – the center should encourage the development and maintenance of positive and healthy relationships, among residents, between residents and their families and loved ones, and between residents and the community at large
- **Responsive to Special Needs** – the center should be designed and operated with women in mind, and should be responsive to their special needs, circumstances, and concerns; services, interventions, and responses to women’s behavior should be individualized wherever possible; and there should be consideration given to vulnerable populations with special needs
- **Trauma-Informed** – the center’s design, programs, and operations should take account of the many ways in which the women’s preexisting trauma can affect their behavior and challenges, should seek to address that trauma, and should change practices that cause further trauma
- **Culturally-Responsive** – the center should operate in a manner that recognizes, respects, and responds sensitively to the differential cultural experiences, values, and needs of a racially and ethnically diverse population of residents
- **Health** – the center should promote the physical and mental health of all residents and staff
- **Recognizing the Capacity for Growth and Change** – the center should recognize the potential in its residents and promote their personal and emotional growth through positive accountability
- **Staffed for Success** – staff should be supportive of the center’s philosophy and approach and should be appropriately trained to meet the needs of the women and gender-expansive people in the facility

Figure 4. Photo from the “Women’s Center for Justice” Proposal (p. 15, 2022)

In the below comparative chart, Columbia Justice Lab (2022:18) describes the Women’s Center for Justice as a space where incarcerated people can do “yoga,” be a part of the “community garden” and visit outdoor spaces that are “landscaped” where they can “decompress... [and engage] in activities such as watching nature videos.” The proposal overlooks the inherent violence that exists in a facility that does not allow people to leave, to hug their children, to visit their families, to travel, and to heal. The facility is a cage. In including this language, they reinforce the assumption that a jail is the only avenue to rehabilitation, which is untrue. Other means include investing in communities through mental health programs, food justice, and mutual aid, as well as ensuring people have access to healthcare and the basic resources they need to live sustainable and peaceful lives. Additionally, Rosie’s, also meant to be a gender-expansive jail with the primary goal of reducing recidivism, it became a torture chamber for many gender-marginalized people.

Outdoor Spaces and Biophilic Design	No direct access to outdoor space; limited natural light; no dedicated decompression spaces	750 square feet of directly accessible outdoor space from each housing area; respite room located in housing areas	Outdoor spaces should be landscaped, immediately accessible, and include a communal garden. Center should include plentiful natural light and have comfortable air flow and temperature. Center should have a “blue room” where residents can decompress and participate in activities such as watching nature videos. Access to nature and natural elements can significantly improve residents’ behavior and mental health. ^[xxiv]
Program Areas			
Recreation Spaces	Limited access to gyms and the outdoors	Large gym	Include gym with equipment and space for running and walking to support residents’ physical and mental health. ^[xxv]
Wellness Spaces	No dedicated wellness or respite spaces	Respite room located in housing area	Include rooms to accommodate yoga, classes on nutrition, weight loss, sexual health, etc. to support residents’ physical and mental health. ^[xxvi]
Operational Spaces			
Co-location	Women and gender-expansive people have their own facility on Rikers Island, separate from the men’s jails	Shared entryway with male residents	A separate building, miles away from the men’s jail, which will reduce the potential for re-traumatization. ^[xxvii]
Meeting Rooms	Private interview rooms	Private interview rooms	Include private rooms for attorney-client meetings. ^[xxviii]
Care Team	Distinct spaces for case managers; limited access for residents	Case managers located in cluster areas	Locate care teams in central activity hub to increase their accessibility. ^[xxix]
Staff Spaces	Separate administrative areas for staff	Separate administrative areas for staff	Include staff desks inside housing pods, create spaces for staff to rest and recharge. ^[xxx]

Figure 5. Photo from the "Women's Center for Justice" Proposal (p. 18, 2022) Description of Design Components

As Mon Moha, a New York-based community organizer asks,

“A lot of the framework for the women’s jail is that it’s staffed by social workers instead of correctional officers, that it would offer more access to therapy... I think the basic question is why does someone need to be incarcerated in order to receive that kind of care?” (Tamar 2022).

Columbia’s Abuses in Harlem

The jail proposal is the latest iteration of the deep and ongoing history of anti-Black violence and displacement in the surrounding Harlem neighborhood perpetuated by Columbia University and its affiliates (Black Students’ Organization at Columbia University 2018-2019). Columbia has continuously published plans to develop into Harlem, which entail increasing their policing and security task-forces in the Harlem area. In recalling my own graduate experience at Columbia University, as a part of our orientation, all students were asked to attend a presentation in which a plan for Columbia’s development was articulated. The plan lauded initiatives to extend security buildings and innovative think tank consortium campuses up into Harlem/Manhattanville. Students were both disgusted and in awe, clearly aware of the implications this would have on the surrounding community.

Columbia University’s development plan is shown in the map below, and displays how the campus is gentrifying up into historically Black Harlem and subsequently pushing out Black and brown residents. Morningside Heights, Harlem, and nearby Columbia University are becoming increasingly more affluent over time. The Neighborhood Projects People of NYC Seminar (n.d.) at Macaulay, CUNY published that the median family income rose from \$33,000 in 1980 to \$56,500 in 1997. Additionally, the proportion of families earning over \$150,000 a year more than doubled between 1990 and 1997. Similarly, since 1968, Columbia purchased and converted more than 6000 units of affordable, rent-regulated housing for its own use and expansion, and has since made no guarantee it will preserve a significant amount of affordable housing units (Coalition Against Gentrification n.d.). The neighborhood directly north of Columbia is largely Black, Hispanic and Latine (United States Census Bureau n.d.) However, the inhabitants of the area are becoming increasingly younger, likely due to students moving into the area, leading to higher rents which force historic communities to become rent-burdened or displaced (United States Census Bureau n.d.). Community organizers and students at Columbia argue that the jail plan in Harlem – a predominantly Black neighborhood with a history of radical activism and resistance – is a direct attack on criminalized Black, poor, migrant, queer, gender-expansive, and disabled

under the guise of progress and academic innovation. Columbia's resources, agendas, proposal developments, and collaborations are actively deploying carceral initiatives in historically Black neighborhoods. Communities write in an open letter calling for an end to the Harlem jail proposal: "The plan treats historically Black, Latinx, and working-class neighborhoods as the ideal settings for jails. Most of those who would be sent to this "Women's Center for Justice" are Black and Latinx survivors of gendered violence and systemic racism" ("An Open Letter," 2022). Columbia University has contributed to the mass criminalization of Harlem residents through its deployment of University "Public Safety," NYPD presence, and surveillance mechanisms, and this plan only forwards their support of racialized geographies of incarceration. The jail's presence could mean increased police presence, surveillance, and police contact with residents who may thereby become targeted by this regime and ultimately entrapped in the growing prison industrial complex.

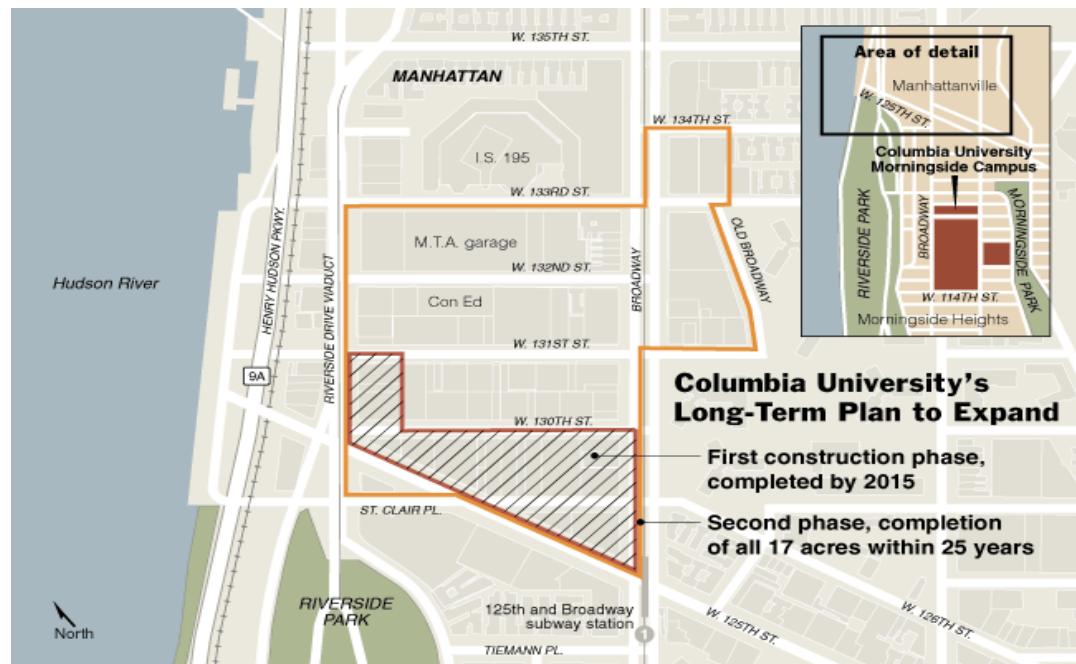


Figure 6. Columbia's Expansion Plan (Bagli, New York Times 2007)

The Columbia Justice Lab held a briefing for the public on its plans for the Center. Craig Gilmore (@CraigOGilmore) discussed what he witnessed on Twitter. The Women's Center for Justice is often framed as not a jail, but a trauma-informed rehabilitative space. However, a place in which people are monitored, surveilled, controlled in every aspect from time outside to food they eat, and cannot leave,

remains exactly the same as the ideas it was predicated on – the Women's Center for Justice is a cage that creates unfreedom. The Women's Center for Justice would be built in the area of the Lincoln Correctional Facility, which is located near the northeastern corner of Central Park. The area is predominantly Black and Hispanic with over 30% of the population in the area living in poverty (United States Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates). With a jail in the area, the police would have more resources and propensity to target local community members who may already be marginalized and vulnerable. This may put those that live near the jail in more danger and harm from policing in the area.



Figure 7. @CraigOGilmore Twitter Jail Discussion

As Craig Gilmore notes, if the center is not a jail, why is the old Lincoln prison a perfect place for it? Why make carceral institutions into newly developed “feminist” centers if it is not also a part of a carceral institution? Columbia students and the public agreed and created a media campaign that went viral on Twitter and in many news outlets. The campaign tied together other campaigns to #FreeThemAll, #NoMoreJails, and end Columbia’s abuses in Harlem, as well as identifying Columbia Justice Lab members that were a part of the proposal. As they argue, no jail could ever be feminist, especially one that continues to push out and incarcerate Black and brown people.

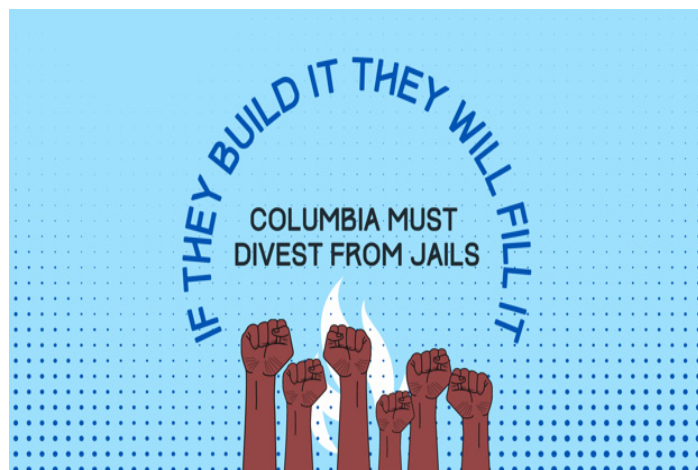


Figure 8 and 9. Organizing Materials Against Columbia's Support for the "Harlem Jail"

Why Abolition is Necessary

Creating more jails that are “humane” is impossible because at its base carceral systems are punitive and rely on taking away people’s freedoms. Proposing a “gender-expansive” and “feminist” jail is not a safety measure, and it instead perpetuates violence. Revoking people’s freedom of mobility, ripping families and communities apart, arresting people, and traumatic police encounters are all a part of the violence that is the prison industrial complex and jail expansion. These practices are the foundational elements of incarceration, and the proposed jail will still operate as a jail, holding people in a cage without escape. The only humane solution is freeing all people, not investing in creating new cages.

To have a truly restorative platform through abolition we need to build up our communities and our support systems. This means re-allocating the billions of dollars used for creating new jails to instead go to housing, safe shelters, public education, healthcare, mental health services, community wellness programs, transportation. We need to invest in care, not carcerality. Care cannot occur in a cage. People need to be with their community, receive services of support, and be able to engage in initiatives that work to heal harm. There is no such thing as a feminist jail. Jails, prisons, and other carceral-like substitutes are violence.

We must invest in decriminalization, reparations, and community-based care to address the structural roots of violence. The only solution that is feminist, gender-affirming, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and trauma-informed is one that allows people their freedom of movement, freedom to make decisions, freedom for people to be themselves, and freedom for people to seek care and support in their communities and be met with love and compassion.

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Isabella Irtifa is a bi-racial second-generation immigrant, community organizer, and PhD student at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities. Her research focuses on the intersection of border abolition and critical race theory. She is committed to building communities of care through organizing against the impacts of settler colonialism and state violence. Isabella graduated with her masters from the Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University, and holds a bachelors degree in Sociology and Ethnic Studies. Her work can be found in The Sociological Review Magazine, UN Women reports, and Watzek, among others.

DR. MICHELE GOODWIN: HISTORIES, NARRATIVES OF THE BODY, AND THE POWER OF EMPIRICISM

Dr. Michele Goodwin is a renowned bioethicist, constitutional legal scholar, prolific writer, and podcast host. Her scholarship and advocacy have forged a path for justice in reproductive health and rights, civil liberties, and educational access. Even more importantly, her work scrutinizes the policing of bodies and identities in American law and interrogates the narratives that people, especially women and people of color, are told of themselves. In our conversation with Michele, we discuss the power of empiricism as a basis for public advocacy and how she navigates multiple mediums and engages different audiences.

Janna Huang (BJS): Hi Professor Michele Goodwin! Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us today. We are so excited and honored to be in conversation with you. Just to start things off, we were wondering if you could tell us a bit about your background, your family's and community's background, and how that has influenced your own academic trajectory?

Professor Michele Goodwin: That's a great question. I was reared by my grandparents in my early years. There were two different sets of grandparents: one from the American South that were part of the Great Black Migration northward and the other that were Midwesterners, but had had some experience in the South multiple generations prior. Being an only child and having that kind of background with my grandparents was greatly influential in terms of how I came to understand the United States, how I came to understand life, and having a warm and loving upbringing with my grandparents. In so many different ways, having that fabric of love and care – stories about your worth, your intelligence, your contributions, all of those things – really matters in terms of what comes later in one's life, because American society so often has something else to tell children of color.

In so many different ways, having that fabric of love and care – stories about your worth, your intelligence, your contributions, all of those things – really matters in terms of what comes later in one's life, because American society so often has something else to tell children of color.

Janna Huang (BJS): How has that love and care that you experienced in your upbringing shaped the things that you decided to pursue in college and afterward?

Professor Michele Goodwin: I would go on trips to the South with my maternal grandmother, who's from the South and specifically from Mississippi. That was like going into another world. Traveling to Mississippi in the 1970s at a time when some Black people still had no running water, no flushing toilets, limited electricity, and lacking the comforts of American life, as a reality of life. In fact, my great-grandfather who lived in Mississippi died without ever having a toilet. Those experiences, even if you don't know how to articulate what all that means then, as a child, stay with you. You observe it. From a sociological point of view, it's interesting to think about how our early observations may serve as a foundation for our research.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): Wow, that's a really powerful experience. Here at BJS, we've long admired your work, but just for the sake of our readers who are getting to know you through this interview, could you tell us a little bit more about your research interests, what your focuses are, and a little more about the initial spark that you had that led to these interests and how you continue to pursue that throughout your career?

Professor Michele Goodwin: This process of observation led me to observe and learn more about people of the African diaspora in college. It's also important to know where we begin. There are threads of it that continue and then other threads that evolve over time, so I was interested in learning about how people evolved and the law's role in people's evolution. Who do we become and how do we become as part of a question about our own agency and what we do? There's also a question about the myriad other forces that interact and engage with us that end up shaping us? We are not alone in terms of our identification. Society does a lot to say about who we are.

Often societal forces influence and may even determine who we become, where we live, where we are educated—if we are educated. That's the whole enterprise of what immigration looks like and what American slavery looks like. There's one narrative, which is that narrative of “here are these incompetent enslaved people who need this enslavement for the betterment of themselves.” It's a narrative that was instantiated in society but supported and buttressed through the law. And then clearly, people were telling themselves a different kind of story, a story other than that. So, I've been curious about the stories that we tell ourselves and the stories that society tells about us, and the law's way of imposing and regulating those narratives. In some ways, those threads also carry out when one is thinking about who women are in society, and who women of color are in society. What are the stories that we tell about ourselves and what do we understand versus the stories that have been imposed through social ordering through law.

So, I've been curious about the stories that we tell ourselves and the stories that society tells about us, and the law's way of imposing and regulating those narratives. In some ways, those threads also carry out when one is thinking about who women are in society, and who women of color are in society. What are the stories that we tell about ourselves and what do we understand versus the stories that have been imposed through social ordering through law.

I remind my students about a case called *Bradwell v. Illinois*, which is a case that involved a woman, who was the first to pass the Illinois bar exam and wanted to become a lawyer. Her husband was a lawyer, and I'm sure she thought, “Well, if he can do it, I can do it too.” But the case was heard by the United States Supreme Court because the state of Illinois barred women from becoming lawyers. In that case, it's the court that says that Myra Bradwell is not suited for the practice of law, and that what she's suited for is caring for her husband and children. It was the law that created this inference. My work engages with those threads of seeing and thinking about how those narratives in law persist. What are the narratives that women tell themselves versus the narratives that come from judges and legislatures? Or constructions dealing with race and policing and LGBTQ equality? Another important thread throughout is our bodies. Bodies and identities have been such a fixture within American law. The policing of bodies was the very first regulation in our country. It's to designate who's in and who's out, who's a citizen and who's not a citizen, who has property, and who does not have property. All those delineations

become crystallized through law and our socio-legal understandings. We're going to fasten people to certain identities such that you can't be fluid with your identity. One drop of whatever it is that we want to designate as being inferior is what you will always be. So, it doesn't matter that it was your great, great, great, great, great grandmother who happened to be Cherokee, Blackfoot, African, or Chinese, you're forever that. You can never leave. And there's a reason why law served as a barrier to people exiting the “inferior” status or never leaving, because that helped to support a project of white supremacy. Otherwise, why is it so complicated for a person to be whatever it is that they happen to be? And then that flows into the project of American eugenics and anti-miscegenation, informing how we see people, how we cabin people, and the law's role in doing that.

Janna Huang (BJS): On the other side of this, which is communicating these different threads of thought to broader audiences, we love that you do so much public-facing work across very different mediums. Who are the different intended audiences for your work?

Professor Michele Goodwin: When I think about the purpose of my work, I want to be able to convey to people why they should care about women's rights, human rights, equality, justice, democracy, civil liberties, and civil rights. But, I also realize that one must do the work of translation if you want people to hear you and invest in learning about what I'm researching and writing about. I think about translation because not everybody's going to have the capacity to hear it in the same way. I want my work to reach people. How does one get a message to someone in a language which they can understand? I think that that's really important when we are doing the very sticky, thorny kind of work, where there has been stratification in society, where there has been animus in society, where there has been resistance. The tools and power of empiricism help with that across all those spaces. I seek to write in a way that I can reach a reading public, such as in op-eds and commentaries. I seek to reach my colleagues through publishing in a variety of journals. I seek to reach courts through amicus briefs. But one of the things that's consistent across those mediums is my deep desire to always ground in what is empirical and a common set of facts. If we can start with what is irrefutable, I think that that helps with the translation. That's the importance of research. We only get to the empirical if we do the research, where then we can say, “Okay, here's a starting ground, here's this space, here's the law, here's the practice, here's what it was, here's how many people were affected, here's where they were affected, here's how they were affected.” Those arcs are so important as a kind of grounding. I found it more important in recent years to do that kind of grounding, at a time in which people are, on substantive matters, reading less, at a time in which people are leaning more into social media

for quick takes, at a time in which we really have lost a sense of “how did we get here?” We do a very poor job in the United States of telling our histories, of being clear about our histories. I find it really important in my scholarship these days to always involve a grounding because otherwise, it's missed. This weekend, I was on a news show, and the anchor highlighted an article that I published seven or eight years ago, when I wrote about whether embryos will be granted rights by state courts. Recently, the Alabama Supreme Court moved in that direction, but it was something that I could tease out years ago, because I was closely watching the trends in the anti-abortion movement.

Janna Huang (BJS): We agree, it's super important to have that empirical grounding that helps inform the policies that we create. In terms of navigating different forms of media, we imagine that writing for constitutional legal experts versus podcasts versus your academic colleagues or the general public is quite different. So how do you navigate these different forms of media while remaining grounded in your empirical work?

Professor Michele Goodwin: I don't know if it's using the muscle, or it's just been natural, but for me sliding into op-ed and commentary, feels very natural. Whereas I think for a lot of people, it feels hard, right? It's difficult to capture a way of writing that conveys both the empirical and tells a story that the public can digest. But I think that people can do it, it just takes work if it's not something that feels natural. At the end of the day, we must remind ourselves why is this important? Why should people care? If you look across these different mediums, it helps us to understand our starting place. We get to that starting place more quickly in an op-ed or commentary because we don't have the luxury of 20,000 words. It's 900 words. In fact, there is something to say about being succinct on matters that are urgent. And, of course, one doesn't want to treat those matters in trivialized ways, which is why it's important to practice the muscle to figure out how to give dignity and importance to a significant issue in only 900 words.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): One of the things that we admire about your work with Ms. Magazine and your On the Issues podcast. First, would you be willing to share with our readers a little bit about both of those? How did you get involved? And how did you start the podcast?

Professor Michele Goodwin: I had been involved with Ms. Magazine and the Feminist Majority by hosting events and collaborating on events that were held in their California office. So again, in thinking about how we can reach people at our academic institutions, or how we can go to where people are. If we have an event

that is at the law school, let's say, then let's make sure that we're bringing people in from the community. And if we have something at the community venue, let's maximize bringing in the community, and then let's also bring in people from the academy such that they're involved with people where they are. We launched the podcast during the pandemic. Ms. Magazine had long wanted to do a podcast and they wanted the right person. Others had approached me about podcasts. But I also wanted to be at the right place to do a podcast. And so, it worked out really well. It's a terrific medium. I love it. Just over the weekend, I was hosting an event for the Abortion Access Front, and I did a live recording with the CEO Lizz Winstead, who was the co-creator of The Daily Show on Comedy Central; she then founded and launched Lady Parts Justice, basically seeking to involve artists, especially comedians in reproductive rights, and thinking about how comedy can be political. We had a great podcast taping that I'm really excited about and can't wait for the public to hear. Just yesterday, we taped materials from an event for the podcast that focused on attacks on healthcare during times of crisis and war, which has been something that's been in Gaza, Ukraine, and other parts of the world. These are very emotive kinds of issues. These are issues that are urgent, and there has been stress in trying to bring about discourse. When I think about the podcasting that I do, I really try to reach people beyond their expertise. Your expertise is important, but I try to reach what is in the heart too. I'm most proud of those episodes where listeners almost feel the journey of the podcast guest. When I think about this recording yesterday, a doctor told his story about being tortured at a jail in Syria and about his three closest friends dying after being tortured and killed. He was tortured for over two weeks. If you just take the academic route, you don't hear that story. One of the privileges and pleasures that I have is actually picking up on the voices of people who otherwise have not received a platform for the issues that deserve to be heard.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): We're curious about what inspires these conversations? How you choose who to talk to?

Professor Michele Goodwin: It's actually somewhat similar to how I pick what I write about in a longer form. It's getting upset about something or saying that there's something important that we need to be thinking about, something that's been missed. I like bringing people together around food. I like bringing different people together such that different elements feed off each other. Somehow all of that comes together and manifests when thinking about this podcast. I've got a wonderful team of assistant producers as well, who are terrific, smart people. I love their ideas. And the titles of our shows—they play an incredible role as well as in other ways, too. They do a phenomenal job.

Janna Huang (BJS): Yeah. So yeah, the reason why we're also asking this is because, you know, we're running a graduate student-run journal that's trying to interface with wider audiences. What advice do you have for graduate students in bridging our research to the public?

Professor Michele Goodwin: Well, you all are writing dissertations and theses, and that's really important to nail that and to get that work done. But also think about once you've got that work, how can that work also translate? How can you use the knowledge production around your research to then be harvested in these other ways to further tell important stories? As I say, expertise needs to be at the center of it. Have you been credible? Have you done the research? Evidence is really important. No matter what you're doing, you're centering evidence. With that, then you can test the waters. You must prepare for blowback, right? Whenever you're doing op-eds and commentary, there is the potential for disagreement, which can be healthy. However, sometimes there are people who can be unwise and vicious. But you can look past all of that when you've actually mounted something with strong evidence. You can just decide to not even read the vile commentary. You don't have to spend time on that. But you do need to be prepared for the possibility that those things will come. Sadly, in the state where we are in now as a country, where we've had a January 6, we have white supremacist marches, where there is a sense of threatened violence on American college campuses, the space of knowledge production has also become a space of violence. It is particularly true in the knowledge production being done by women. You can go from the dismissal of women having any space or place to another end, where people are angry at what you have to say. Where you're documenting things that are in fact law cases, what other sociologists have said, but somehow, you know, people want to not just throw figurative arrows, but literal arrows as an unfortunate thing about the weaponization of the intellectual space in these times.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): That leads well into our next question. There's a politically and legally at stake with abortion and reproductive rights right now. We're curious about your current thoughts on what is happening right now? How do you think sociology, law, and bioethics can speak to this moment?

Professor Michele Goodwin: This is a moment of enormous crisis in our country. We're in a time in which there are children who have been locked in cages and the federal government--under the last president--arguing before federal courts that those kids didn't deserve soap and toothpaste. When you have a nation that has issued a ban on Muslim people from being able to enter the country. When

you have a nation that has gutted abortion rights while at the same time severely chipping away at reproductive freedoms for women, singling out women and not men there is a tragedy.

We're in a crisis...how much more do we need to say? And one of the clear vehicles of being able to respond to these crises is in deciding who you get to elect. That said, voting rights are being gerrymandered or suppressed, disenfranchising people. The chaos and pain make it very hard for people to be able to sustain focus and concentration on these other issues that are all around us. I try to think of ways to bring some light to that.

We see the cruelty of attacks on families with children that are non-binary, such that kids now have to go forward and testify before state legislatures, exposing themselves to violence when they plead "Treat me with dignity, please." Then we have states that have now banned books written by authors of color, that have been written by survivors of the Holocaust. We have lawmakers that have said that these books should not only be banned, but should also be burned. When parents have to sign releases to allow their children to participate in storytime because the author happens to be black. We're in a crisis...how much more do we need to say? And one of the clear vehicles of being able to respond to these crises is in deciding who you get to elect. That said, voting rights are being gerrymandered or suppressed, disenfranchising people. The chaos and pain make it very hard for people to be able to sustain focus and concentration on these other issues that are all around us. I try to think of ways to bring some light to that. The opportunity for voices to come together on that, which includes my voice, and the opportunity to sort of think forward, but in all of that, trying to reach people who might think, "Okay, I was able to cross the bridge, I was able to flip the light switch, I was able to do all of those things. Why should I care about this? An insurrection? Why should I care about kids who've been separated from their parents? Why should I care about what's happening at our southern borders, you know, all of those kinds of things?"

Janna Huang (BJS): That's a really powerful way of putting it, bringing light to issues when everything is operating as normal. To maybe end on a relatively positive note, we were curious to know who or what is inspiring you these days to continue doing this work?

Professor Michele Goodwin: There are so many points of inspiration. It's an important question. I'm inspired by Patricia Williams. I'm inspired by Dorothy Roberts. I'm inspired by Khiara Bridges. I'm inspired by Lori Andrews. I'm inspired by my students. I'm inspired by the legacy of my grandmothers. I'm inspired by someone like Charles Sumner who was a senator from Massachusetts, who was an abolitionist and invested time, mind, and body into the pursuit of abolition. I'm inspired by the myriad authors that I read, who helped to document these various periods of time in which I like to go back and center my research. I'm inspired by people who have yet to have their due but have done so much for the principles of democracy. I begin to think about the kind of women who used their energy picketing in the 1950s and 60s. These women who suffered the literal and figurative blows for the sake of our democracy. Women like Fannie Lou Hamer could represent a whole generation of women. I'm inspired by Ruby Bridges's mother. Imagine what it takes to say, "I'll have my daughter go to school with armed guards around her and people outside threatening to lynch her." Imagine what it must take to be in that frame of mind, where you have so much hope, but you also risk so much, in order for this promise of the America that's documented in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, to have a hope of being alive. So much inspires me. I appreciate you and what you're both doing. So thank you, Tiffany and thank you Janna. Wishing you the absolute best.



Dr. Michelle Bratcher Goodwin is a highly visible thought-leader, podcast host, professor, and frequent commentator on MSNBC, lending her expertise on matters of constitutional law, reproductive justice, and the state of American democracy. She is a distinguished professor at Georgetown University, holding the prestigious Linda D. & Timothy J. O'Neill Professorship of Constitutional Law and Global Health Policy. Dr. Goodwin is one to the most cited health law scholars in the world and a highly regarded public intellectual with commentaries appearing in the NY Times, Washington Post, The Atlantic, The Nation, the L.A. Times, Newsweek, Ms. magazine and other publications. She has testified before state and federal legislators on matters of health and reproductive justice. Dr. Goodwin is the author of six books and over 100 articles and commentaries on matters of law, medicine, reproductive health, and biotechnologies. She is the 2022 recipient of the American Bar Association's Margaret Brent Award and in 2023 she was honored by the California Women's Law Center with their prestigious Pursuit of Justice Award. Dr. Goodwin is author of the award-winning book, *Policing The Womb: Invisible Women and The Criminalization of Motherhood*. She is the Executive Producer at Ms. Studios.

ARMED SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS AND THE SAFETY OF CALIFORNIA'S BLACK AND LATINE(X) YOUTH: POLICIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

by Larissa Cursaro,
D. Azarmi,
Kelsey Perez, &
Carlos Flores

The Problem

Students of color, disabled students, and disempowered students are targeted and victimized by School Resource Officers (SROs). Students of color are subjected to violence and arrests by SROs, creating lasting harm in their lives, and further sustaining the school-to-prison pipeline. Much like with community law enforcement, studies suggest that SROs have been disproportionately policing schools in the United States. One study concludes that Black students are much more likely to feel vulnerable to being victimized by violence in schools with stationed armed officers compared to their peers (Lacoe 2015). A detailed report released last year found that Black students were recipients of violence in 84% of campus incidents involving police officers in schools, while only making up 15% of public school enrollment (Advancement Project 2022). This trend remains consistent when analyzing the statistics of SRO presence in California.

Quantifying/Qualifying the Problem

The Civil Rights Data Collection done by the U.S. Department of Education shows that students of color are especially vulnerable to police violations and arrests (Off. for Civ. Rts 2017). Similar research confirms that Black students are three times as likely to be referred to law enforcement compared to that of white students (Off. for Civ. Rts 2017). While Black students make up 6% of California enrollment, they make up approximately 15% of student arrests. Latino boys make up 28% of California students but represent 44% of student arrests (Off. for Civ. Rts 2017).

In California, 62% of school districts allowed staff to call the police to handle "school rule violations" and behavioral misconduct (ACLU 2021). While concerning state-wide, this trend manifests locally, as well. According to data released by the Fresno

Unified School District, Black students made up about 17% of all SRO arrests on public school campuses, even though they only make up about 8% of the student body (Fresno CPR 2022). In Victor Valley Union High School, Black students were the recipients of harsher and longer punishments than their white peers, which decreased the quality and amount of time spent in classrooms (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, and U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division 2023). A study done by the U.S. Department of Education shows that Black girls in public schools are four times more likely to be arrested by SROs than their white peers, making them one of the most vulnerable groups on school campuses (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2018).

In some cases, school administration and staff members call on SROs to address bullying issues, especially when parents feel their concerns are being overlooked by the school (Devlin, Rennó Santos, Gottfredson 2018). However, SROs are not equipped to handle student conflict appropriately, which can often lead to a child being referred for disorderly conduct (Whitaker, Cob, Leung, Nelson 2021). Many of the intervention strategies and interactions between SROs and students are hostile which can have long-lasting psychological and physiological effects on the body (Washington, Hazelton 2023). Practices such as unwarranted searches, detection dogs, pepper spraying, handcuffing, and excessive force are considered correctional and damage the student's trust and feelings of safety with the SROs (Washington et al. 2023).

Diagnoses

The historical development of policing in the United States, its entanglement in schools and its roots in racial domination and hierarchy is a vital context for understanding how current policies have manifested.

The institution of policing was constructed through the implementation of "Slave Patrols" in the South, dating back to the 1700's (Lepore 2020). The purpose of the Southern patrollers at that time was exclusively to capture and return runaway slaves; a concept implemented by white men to reinforce institutional power. Within this reality lies the connection between the institution of policing and the maintenance of "social order" that is dependent upon the criminalization and demonization of Black and Latine(x) people as a means of maintaining racial hierarchies (NAACP 2020). This is evident in the disproportionate impacts of most aspects of policing on Black and Latine(x) communities, from arrests to searches and seizures, charges, and even death at the hands of police.

After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement brought attention to the criminalization of Black people. Many other organizations and communities stood alongside the Black Lives Matter movement and demanded police reform. These nationwide protests created an opportunity to confront our nation's history rooted in white supremacy and to advocate for empowerment for all. This movement towards policing reform was not confined to police officers patrolling streets but expanded to evaluate the presence of police officers in schools. According to the United States Department of Justice, a School Resource Officer (SRO) is a "sworn law enforcement officer responsible for safety and crime prevention in schools." These officers work with school district personnel in an attempt to foster safer environments in their respective schools. SROs, much like police officers, have the ability "to make arrests, respond to calls for service, and document incidents that occur within their jurisdiction" to achieve this goal (U.S. Department of Justice 2023).

SRO programs first appeared in the United States during the 1950s, in response to the integration of schools and Black Migration to northern and southwestern states (Lindberg 2015). One such example is the Oakland Unified School District, which included an SRO presence during and after World War II (McBride 2020). However, the inclusion of SROs did not become commonplace nationwide until the late 1990s, after the U.S. saw an increase in gun violence on school campuses. Media-driven fearmongering surrounding school shootings spread panic among students and parents which led to greater support for SRO placements in their communities (Burns and Crawford 1999). After the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, national leaders and parents continued to support SRO placements in hopes of preventing similar events from reoccurring. Since 2013, there have been 245 school shootings in the United States (Cox and Rich 2023). With the pleadings of many community members, advocates, and local leaders, SROs quickly became the answer to ensuring the safety of children at school (The School Policing Research to Policy Collaborative and The Federal School Discipline and Climate Coalition 2021). However—much like with community law enforcement—some studies suggest that SROs have been unjustly policing schools in the United States. One study suggests that Black students are much more likely to feel vulnerable to being victimized by violence in schools with stationed armed officers compared to their peers (Lacoe 2015). Furthermore, there is also little evidence to suggest that SROs are vital to preventing school-based violence and shootings. Between 1999 and 2018, for example, deaths and injuries were about 2.5 times higher in schools where an SRO was present (Mowen 2020).

Beyond the root of racism within policing, there are important intersections between the carceral and judicial systems that are driven by the existence of police. The aforementioned similarities in the definition and purpose of an SRO pose a serious concern for developing youth. These officers are trained to control the general public yet they are responsible for regulating a nurturing learning environment. SROs are not only deputized with the ability to charge students with offenses that can permanently impact their criminal records, but they embody the selectively oppressive reality that many disadvantaged students fear outside of their school campus. There is a direct correlation between the students that the police victimize and those who end up trapped in the criminal justice system (Burns et al. 1999).

Having often received the same training as regular police officers—with no additional training in working with youth—SROs are indoctrinated to use force and intimidation tactics rather than de-escalate situations. By relying on force and intimidation, rather than trying to calmly use non-violent methods, the cycle of violence continues. The framework police and SROs adhere to is psychologically antithetical to the recommended methods of working with youth, especially the "at-risk" populations that SROs most frequently target. Police presence in schools leads to increased exclusion from the classroom and criminalization of students, especially those of color. When schools rely on school police, they contribute to school pushout and the school-to-prison pipeline while creating an overall negative learning environment (NWLC 2021).

Policy Objectives

Our goal is to create an environment where all students can experience school safety and be provided with the support they need to thrive. Since school safety is a layered issue, it is important to define what a safe school environment looks like. According to the American Institute for Research, school safety refers to the feeling of protection that people experience when they are in a place of learning that is free of danger (Diaz-Vicario and Sallán 2017). In addition, school safety includes "both the freedom from bodily infringement or harm and the freedom for physical, emotional, and social safety, i.e., the creation and upkeep of spaces where all students can be authentically themselves" (Arizona Department of Education 2020).

Status Quo: Regulations to Ensure SRO Standards

To be hired as a School Resource Officer (SRO) in the state of California, each individual must complete specialized training approved by the Bureau of

Security and Investigative Services of the Department of Consumer Affairs and in consultation with The Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments; State of California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training 2023). While this creates a statewide standard determining how SROs must act, it does not create a statewide standard regarding each specific program. This training solely discusses how SROs should respond to different behavioral issues—such as distinguishing between in-class disruptions compared to some more violent concerns such as weapons on campus. Thus, SRO programs are very personalizable to the school district in which they patrol, allowing both the district office and local police departments to decide how to fulfill the needs of the student body. Funding for SRO programs is also determined by the local governments, with many districts opting to split the funding between the local police department, the school district, or the city budget (Cross et al. 2022). This allows for the local community to decide the size of the SRO program on their public school campuses, creating flexibility and customization depending on the specific situations of each community.

Alternative 1: Reform - Standardize SRO Contracts and Training

One of the greatest challenges with attempting to modify the behavior of individual SROs is that contracts vary between districts and schools; in some instances, officers at the same school can be under different contracts (EKU 2023). The most direct way to address the problematic variance observed in officer behavior is to create universal basic principles, purpose, and objectives for SROs through standardized contracts and training. This could lead to the creation of universal roles, and responsibilities, and set expectations of best practices.

It must be acknowledged that reforming the purpose and general focus of SROs is difficult because they are often trained and managed by police departments. Generally, attempting to modify behaviors and decrease bias with training for officers is challenging, but can reduce arrest rates if sustained, which is of primary concern when it comes to SRO infractions impacting students' permanent records (National Policing Institute 2023). Reform should include a training component with standardized modules that include youth-focused training on de-escalation, mental health support, and positive reinforcement practices. Further, requiring that officers report instances of physical interaction with students and investigating excessively repeated encounters with specific students are additional accountability measures that should be standardized. Finally, requiring a college education for officers who will work as SROs can be an additional step to decrease the likelihood

that officers may respond with physical force or aggression toward students (Rosenfeld, Johnson, and Wright 2018).

Alternative 2: Divest and Invest

In California, School Resource Officers are funded through a variety of mechanisms, which can include school budgets, contracts with local police departments, federal and local grants, and other local sources of funding. California Education Code § 38000 states that a school district may establish security departments, also known as police departments, to ensure the safety of school personnel and students. Currently, California Education Code § 38000 provides no mandate as to how California Schools should allocate their funds, as this is mostly done at the local school district level. We propose that this code be amended to mandate school districts to divest in School Resource Officers and re-invest in their mental health support resources at a level in which both are equal to each other. In addition, the interventions we will propose local school districts to invest in will consist of interventions for students in need of mental or behavioral support, individual and group therapy as well as connected systems of support within their respective schools and communities provided by counselors, social workers, mentors, and advisors, among others (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, and Pollitt 2013). Moreover, it is crucial that these supports not only address students' needs but also create an equitable learning environment geared toward students' academic success, regardless of race or physical ability.

Alternative 3: Repeal California Education Code § 38000, Ca. Educ. Code § 38001, Ca. Educ. Code § 38001.5

Currently, California law allows school districts to establish a security department under the direction of the superintendent (California Education Code § 38000). The governing board of a school district may establish a school police department and employ peace officers to ensure the safety of schools. By repealing California Education Codes §38000, §38001, and §38001.5, the state would prevent school districts from establishing police departments and would abolish police presence in schools statewide. The repeal of these three California Education Codes would be a powerful first step into achieving transformative and racial justice within schools, allowing school districts to invest in students' education, student development, and after-school programs. Such programs support communities of color and ensure that they thrive. Rather than giving police departments more opportunity to cause physical and mental harm to students of color, repealing California Education

Codes §38000, §38001, and §38001.5 would allow schools to decide how to protect students’ well-being and safety.

Criteria and Analysis

Policy alternatives will be rated from 1 to 5—with 1 representing a low ranking and 5 representing an excellent ranking—using the following criteria:

- 1. **Effectiveness:** Does the policy meet the policy objectives by preventing the police from mentally and physically harming Black and Latine(x) students?
- 2. **Equity:** How does the policy ensure that all students’ needs are prioritized, especially those who are a part of historically marginalized communities?
- 3. **Political Feasibility:** Given how much money the California state budget is allocated for the police, can we mobilize enough partners to support the policy’s passing and implementation?

Project Outcomes, Analyze Alternatives, & Confront Tradeoffs

Criteria 1: Effectiveness	
Policy	Score
Status Quo	1
Alternative 1: Standardize SRO Con- tracts and Training	3
Alterantive 2: Invest In Well-being	4
Alternative 3: Repeal California Educa- tion Code	4

Status Quo

Currently, there is no standardization of various structural aspects to on-campus resource officers. The entities which fund these programs as well as the amount of officers per capita are decided on the local level, without much guidance from the state government. While this allows for flexibility for each community to decide the number of officers it needs in its public schools, it also leaves the responsibility of equity up to the good faith of each program, leaving the possibility for unchecked prejudice. This lack of standardization of equity-driven regulations and standards also allows for different districts to retain different forms of punishment, such as the zero-tolerance policies which have been proven to disproportionately punish

Black and Latine(x) students subsequently removing them from educational spaces. This lack of a state-wide equity-driven standard also allows for different schools to instill different preventative forms of punishment—such as drug dogs and metal detectors, among others—which turn educational spaces into those that mirror carceral spaces.

In California, there is very little emphasis on race and ethnicity in SRO training. Thus, the prevention of mental and physical harm inflicted on Black and Latine(x) students by SROs is not a standardized priority, statewide. As illustrated by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), students who receive punitive responses to disruptions, much like those encouraged by current SRO training, miss the necessary class time which not only leaves them unprepared for life in secondary school, but also increases their likelihood of falling victim to the school-to-prison pipeline. The lack of equity-driven standards for SROs in California would only continue to perpetuate this cycle of incarceration for Black and Latine(x) youth, leading to the further and long-term destabilization of their communities across the state.

Policy Alternative 1: Standardize SRO Contracts and Training

While standardizing training, job duties, and contracts would have direct impacts on officers, there are no guarantees about the longevity of the outcomes of “advanced” training nor of accountability measures, such as disciplinary action, to uphold agreements or duties outlined in standardized job descriptions. Due to contracts being held at the county level, counties would likely be in charge of seeing through the implementation of training as well as the reporting and tracking necessary to reprimand officers who are not performing satisfactorily nor reward those who excel. These limitations create a vacuum in which the true effectiveness of these measures is largely undefined and inherently difficult to quantify. While state-level reform would be ideal, it is far less politically feasible and thus cannot be effectively implemented.

Further, the deeper roots of having police enforcing the law instead of mental health professionals supporting students’ well-being in schools permeate far below the surfaces these reforms can scratch. Environmental factors show us that the kids who fear police the most are the most frequently victimized by them – dynamics that are typically defined far before students enter environments where SROs are present, despite continuing to affect all students (Fine et al. 2022). With both personal and societal root causes compounding against Black and Latine(x) students, who are

already the most marginalized and targeted in schools, it is evident that simple procedural reform is less than optimal in terms of impact. Contractual reform has underwhelming impacts when compared with the benefits of reframing and reinvesting programming related to student well-being based on needs (Momeni, Adukia, Feigenberg 2022).

Policy Alternative 2: Invest in Well-being

School Resource Officer spending in California is hard to track, which stems from the shared responsibility of funding SROs by law enforcement agencies, school districts, states, and federal grant programs, as well as the lack of information on SRO presence in schools (Sorensen, Avila-Acosta 2022). In addition, SROs are not required to register in national databases, nor are police departments or schools required to report the number of SROs they employ, making it challenging to have an exact count of SROs (Connery 2023). However, research that combined the number of SROs as reported to the CRDC with the annual mean wages of police and sheriff’s patrol officers by state from the 2017 wave of the Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) was able to approximate that total nationwide spending for SROs is \$2.62 billion in inflation-adjusted 2023 dollars(Avila-Acosta, Sorensen 2023).

Using this proxy, in California alone, the per-pupil spending on SROs is \$37.03 per student (Avila-Acosta et al. 2023). Re-allocating even half of these funds into mental health services would translate to around \$115,348,487 in total gains (Civil Rights Data Collection 2023). These funds could then be used to increase the number of counselors, school psychologists, and other mental health professionals that could help serve students in retention efforts, the promotion of re-specialization and professional retraining of existing mental health providers, and help increase the diversity and cultural linguistic competency of school-based mental health providers (U.S Department of Education 2023). If we use the scope of police presence in schools as a metric for the number of school-based arrests, then a 50% reduction could potentially lead to a decrease in 4,750 school-based arrests (Civil Rights Data Collection 2017). In addition, given that the total loss in lifetime earnings for formerly imprisoned people is \$484,400 and \$98,800 for those convicted but not imprisoned, then the potential economic gains in a 50% reduction rate are vast (Brennan Center For Justice 2020). By implementing this policy statewide, California could increase the economic gains in both student’s lifetime earnings and improve the resource allocation to student mental health.

Policy Alternative 3: Repeal California Education Code

Research has shown the police in schools disproportionately harm students of color which escalates anxiety, creates a sense of distrust between peers, and reinforces negative relationships between students, school officials, and the police. By repealing California Education Codes § 38000, § 38001, and § 38001.5, this policy will reduce the mental and physical risks of having police officers in schools. Instead of punishment, the statewide elimination of School Resource Officers would promote anti-racist policies that allow us to reimagine safety practices that are conducive to nurturing environments for students. The only way to prevent marginalized communities on school campuses from being harassed by police is to mandate a policy that will make it illegal for them to operate on school grounds. This policy uses an abolitionist framework that requires society to reimagine the system.

Some cities in California have already implemented SRO removal from their school districts. In 2020, the Black Organizing Project (BOP) successfully won a decade-long battle for the removal of SROs in Oakland schools. In 2021, a student-led coalition was successful in convincing the Los Angeles Unified School District’s Board of Education to reduce its \$70 million police department budget to \$25 million so that it could reinvest its money into youth programs.

Criteria 2: Equity	
Policy	Score
Status Quo	1
Alternative 1: Standardize SRO Contracts and Training	3
Alterantive 2: Invest In Well-being	5
Alternative 3: Repeal California Education Code	4

Status Quo

The current policy does not ensure that all students’ needs are prioritized. The required SRO training lacks the language these students need for success and empowerment while ignoring the current observed phenomena impacting the lives of Black and Latine(x) students, such as the school-to-prison pipeline and forced absenteeism. This training is so separated from serving the youth that, according to California’s Racial and Identity Profiling Advisory Board, “the National Association

for School Resource Officers (NASRO), raises concerns about officers that are not specifically trained to work with youth responding to schools.” This illustrates how SRO training results in officers who are ill-prepared to work with youth, regardless of their race and ethnicity (Kirby 2020). Thus, the current policy not only fails Black and Latine(x) students by not acknowledging their unique needs, it fails all students by inadequately training SRO officers to respond to situations involving youth regardless of their ethnic or racial background.

Policy Alternative 1: Standardize SRO Contracts and Training

Modifying SRO contracts and updating training will alleviate the burden on Black and Latine(x) students. Modifications to job descriptions, general duties, and the philosophical orientation of SROs present on campuses will benefit all students. Shifting the focus of SROs from enforcing the law to serving as mentors to students will create new goals for relationship building and emphasize engaging with students in more nurturing ways (Curran et al. 2019). Further, discouraging SROs from engaging in discipline entirely and leaning into mentorship such as serving as liaisons to administrators is recommended. This shift would positively impact the psychological development of all students, not just those who are disproportionately targeted by SROs. Research suggests that SROs have an inverse relationship with students obeying legal authority, so the spillover benefits could extend beyond the classroom leading to students who are more likely to be law-abiding citizens and who pursue higher education (Fine et al. 2022).

Two of the main areas of training for SROs include implicit bias and de-escalation; both of which have positive externalities for all campus members. For example, having officers pledge to equity agreements re-centers the needs of Black and Latine(x) students while benefiting all students by prompting SROs to prioritize de-escalation rather than punitive measures. Additionally, removing any quotas that might be included in contracts disincentivizes officers from excessively monitoring or provoking students. Studies show that students who have been punished by SROs are less likely to return to school and more likely to end up involved in the criminal justice system (Aizer and Doyle 2015). It is in the interest of all members of society to decrease the number of students arrested by SROs, as the negative impacts of youth becoming justice-involved impact not only fellow students but all community members.

Policy Alternative 2: Invest in Well-being

Although the gains in this policy alternative—as outlined in the effectiveness

criteria—focus on improving the equitable outcomes for students of color, the gains and benefits in alternative three are not limited solely to these. This phenomenon is known as the curb-cut effect, which illustrates the outsize benefits that accrue to everyone from policies and investments designed to achieve equity. Disabled students and students with mental health needs—who also face disproportionate police violence in schools—will benefit from a decreased police presence. In addition, no total loss in school budget or employment disparities in local districts will be faced, as funds will not be decreasing but budgeting allocation will be diverted in other proportions.

Policy Alternative 3: Repeal California Education Code

Research has shown that Black and Latine(x) students are disproportionately affected in California schools (Nelson, Leung, Cobb 2017). Whereas the status quo policy puts school districts and police departments at the forefront of the issue, this alternative would center youth and provide more resources supporting student development. This policy would allow teachers and school administration to be the sole, authoritative figure on school campuses, allowing them to build stronger bonds with students. By implementing a new behavioral framework for youth that is preventive and culturally sensitive, we will set them up for a more equitable education.

In some California school districts, teachers and administrative staff agree that there should be less money spent on the police and more on counseling to support students’ well-being (Jones 2020). With this policy, school districts will have more money to invest in student development and social programs as their contracts with police departments will be dissolved. This alternative would align with our goal of implementing anti-racist policies that focus on restorative processes rather than punitive consequences.

Criteria 3: Political Feasibility	
Policy	Score
Status Quo	5
Alternative 1: Standardize SRO Contracts and Training	4
Alternative 2: Invest In Well-being	2
Alternative 3: Repeal California Education Code	3

Status Quo

Since there is a lack of overarching standardization regarding how SRO programs are instituted and funded, each community has the freedom to specialize its program to fit its perceived needs. This allows for flexibility for each community to decide who funds the program, how many officers are present, and if they decide to have an SRO at all. Thus, the status quo is very attractive politically—it gives communities the freedom to determine the most advantageous programs for their students while disregarding the needs of Black and Latine(x) youth. Regardless of partisanship, the current policies ensure that communities make decisions aligning with their political leanings. Furthermore, the current standard has been in place since 2001 and has yet to be challenged successfully, only adding to its likelihood of gaining support in the future.

Policy Alternative 1: Standardize SRO Contracts and Training

Reforming policy is often the most politically feasible and thus more pursued avenue. The spectrum of feasible reform varies greatly state by state, with California holding far more potential than most. The following core recommendations are highly feasible and could easily be enacted at the state level to trickle down and frame county contracts and desired outcomes.

There is a general movement to streamline officers around standardized training through the NASRO's 40-hour training. The next recommended step in deepening universal training would be to require all officers to complete the Adolescent Mental Health Training for School Resource Officers and Educators (AMHT), which is an additional 24-hour training that “helps School Resource Officers and school personnel better identify and respond to students who are suspected of having mental health needs.” Additionally, training specific to building trust and relationship building is extremely beneficial and increases overall success rates of officers achieving desired outcomes. Beyond detecting imminent threats or students' need for support, for SROs to be successful they must have the capacity and the tenacity to connect with students on a deeper level.

Policy Alternative 2: Invest in Well-being

At the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, the national outrage resulting from the murder of George Floyd and the increased police violence caused a surge in the call for police to be “defunded.” During this time, there were numer-

ous policy implementations that managed to successfully decrease police budgets in local departments. Although the proposed alternative “Invest in Well Being” does not advocate for the downsizing of police departments, being able to briefly review the result of some of these efforts can give us some insight into the political feasibility of this alternative.

Taking a look at the city of Oakland, the rise in support for the “defund” movement coincided with a critical time in Oakland PD's budget vote. In June 2020, the city voted to create a task force to reimagine public safety and also reduced OPD's budget by 50%, with savings reinvested in the community. However, one year later, public support for the cuts reversed with Oakland's police chief and mayor, stating that crime was “out of control.” In addition, numerous Bay Area school districts had voted to reduce SRO presence in schools during 2020, but also similarly reversed these decisions in coming years, citing pushback from parents. De-investment gains in this arena have been minimal if any.

Policy Alternative 3: Repeal California Education Code

In the wake of an increase in police violence, many school districts in California have advocated for policies that would eliminate SROs from their campuses. National reckoning has allowed us to examine the white supremacist and racist ideologies that are embodied by police officers. Movement building and local organizing are central to challenging the status quo and current political narratives that dominate our society. In this political landscape, we need now more than ever to address police brutality, especially among youth. School curriculum teaches students that police officers are there to help protect them and their peers, however, research has shown that many Black and Latine(x) students do not feel safe when they are present on school grounds. Various student-led organizations are key players in this policy objective and already are contributing to change. School boards may have reservations, out of concerns that they cannot handle most student misconduct. However, if the policy is implemented, there will be specific programs with professionals who are equipped to handle a variety of issues that students face.

Sadly, many districts across the country have seen that the removal of SROs has not implemented meaningful changes for students. With increased gun-related violence on school campuses that our nation's leaders still cannot remedy, many districts across the country are reinstating their SRO programs. There needs to be more data and information available to determine why programs are being reinstated and what effect this is having on youth.

Recommendation

Project Outcomes based on Effectiveness, Equity, and Political Feasibility		
Policy	Scores	Total Rank
Status Quo	Effectiveness: 1 Equity: 1 Political Feasibility: 5	4
Alternative 1: Standardize SRO Contracts and Training	Effectiveness: 3 Equity: 3 Political Feasibility: 4	3
Alternative 2: Invest in Well-being	Effectiveness: 4 Equity: 5 Political Feasibility: 2	2
Alternative 3: Repeal California Education Code	Effectiveness: 4 Equity: 4 Political Feasibility: 3	1

Upon reviewing each policy alternative through the lens of these three criteria, this analysis concludes that pursuing Policy Alternative 3: Repeal California Education Code is likely to best align the needs of many stakeholders while producing the best outcomes in terms of meeting the academic, mental, and physical needs of Black and Latine(x) youth who attend public schools in California.

These laws and education codes impact students and the implications of this recommendation will vary, depending on the geopolitical scope of the area in which it is being adopted. For example, as noted previously, momentum to decrease police presence and invest in mental health has already begun in liberal-leaning parts of California. We expect that such areas of California will be more likely to adapt this law with less pushback and higher levels of successful implementation of the funds to its intended resources (mental health resources, counseling, school support). However, more-conservative areas of California may see more pushback from political leaders, and the implementation of this policy may not translate to its intended outcomes. One such possibility being the risk that rather than using the increased funds for mental health resources, districts may not choose to reinvest into better learning environments for Black and Latine(x) youth. While possibly politically contentious, Policy Alternative 3: Repeal California Education Code advocates for the safe and welcoming learning environment necessary for an empowering learning environment for California's Black and Latine(x) youth.

As the state continues to look inward to mitigate disenfranchisement and oppression, repealing Education Codes §38000, §38001, and §38001.5 would be one step towards a brighter future for all Californians, regardless of race and ethnicity.

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LISTEN TO ME BECAUSE I'M A MOM: CONSTRUCTING MOTHERHOOD AS A SOURCE OF STANDING IN THE GUN DEBATE

by KAYLIN
BOURDON

Introduction

Who deserves to have a voice on issues that matter? In polarized debates on issues such as guns, abortion, and immigration, a constellation of activists contends to be heard and advocate for their point of view. To win attention, an activist strives to present themselves as someone who deserves to be heard. Activists frame themselves by making meaning around their individual identities, experiences, and qualifications, emphasizing aspects they believe will persuade audiences, such as media outlets, to listen and acknowledge their claims. In doing so, they make an argument for standing, or their right to speak and be heard on a given issue.

This paper explores how activists on opposing sides of the gun debate talk about themselves, presenting an argument about why they deserve to be heard, and how this shapes their position on guns. Gun-related violence is a serious problem in the United States, accounting for nearly 15 deaths per 100,000 people, a rate far surpassing that of other developed countries.¹ Yet, there has been hardly any federal policy to address gun violence in the last 30 years.² This is partly the result of the strategic efforts of social movements and an extremely polarized policy debate. At the current moment, there is little common ground because opponents in this conversation understand the issue differently. Social movements and activists contribute to this division by making conflicting arguments about the meaning of guns and about just who deserves to make claims and be heard on this issue.

1. While media coverage tends to focus on mass shootings, most of the gun violence in the United States is a result of suicide, single homicide, and accidental shootings. See Gramlich (2023).
2. The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022 ended a nearly 30-year stalemate on federal policy aimed to prevent gun violence. See Bourdon (2020).

I focus on two prominent female activists who, at the time of data collection in 2018–2019, represented major organizations on each side of the debate. Shannon Watts founded Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America after the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December of 2012. She refers to herself as a “full-time volunteer” working on a range of activities, from leading “Stroller Jam” protests outside of congressional offices to speaking at events across the country. Dana Loesch was a paid spokesperson for the National Rifle Association (NRA), the largest and most powerful gun rights organization.³ As a spokesperson for the NRA, Loesch engaged with the media and other audiences to make claims on behalf of the organization.

While Watts and Loesch take opposing positions in the debate and occupy different organizational roles, they both portray themselves as mothers. In doing so, they suggest that motherhood is a source of standing, or a worthy basis to make claims and be heard in the gun debate (Meyer and Bourdon 2020). Yet, they talk about motherhood differently, and their shared identity as mothers leads them to different positions on guns. Motherhood is a powerful—and extremely flexible—identity. Both activists believe that motherhood will bring them attention and credibility in the gun debate, even as they define it differently.

I will begin by reviewing the relevant literature on claim-making in social movements and motherhood as a basis to make claims. Then, I will discuss the data and methods used for this research and present the findings. I argue that Watts—representing gun control—constructs motherhood in collectivist terms of community welfare. This informs her position on guns as a potential threat to the safety of our communities and focus on gun policy that could prevent this violence. In contrast, Loesch—representing gun rights—constructs motherhood in individualistic terms of personal responsibility. This informs her position on guns, as a tool to protect one’s family, and focus on the individual rights of gun owners. So, while motherhood could appear to be a source of common ground, the flexibility of the identity means it can be used simultaneously by opposing sides of the gun debate.

Framing as Meaning-Making

Social movements use framing as a rhetorical tool to give meaning to groups of

3. I refer to Dana Loesch as an activist because she advocates for gun rights on behalf of the NRA. However, it is notable that Loesch is a paid employee of the NRA, and in addition to being a social movement organization, the NRA is an extremely powerful lobby.

people, issues, and organizations as part of a strategic effort to attract attention and support (Klandermans 1984; Snow et al. 1986). Activists use framing to construct issues so that they align with their position and the viewpoints of audiences. Activists seek to frame issues in ways they believe will win over an audience and persuade others to care about their cause. As in most polarized issues, there is a difference in how each side frames guns. Contemporary gun rights activists often emphasize a constitutional right to self-defense (a relatively “new” interpretation of the Second Amendment).⁴ They portray guns as a tool to protect themselves, their family, and their property. Gun rights activists emphasize responsible gun ownership, promoting a personal responsibility model—that it is up to gun owners to ensure the safe and responsible use of guns. They argue that gun violence can only be stopped by responsible gun owners.⁵ In contrast, gun control activists tend to emphasize the potential threat of violence that comes with guns. Most gun control activists are not “anti-gun,” and some gun control activists even argue that gun ownership is a right, albeit one that can and should be restricted. Gun control activists also emphasize responsible gun ownership, but contend that this should be enforced through policy to protect society, rather than relying on the personal responsibility of individuals.

In addition to framing the issues they care about, activists frame themselves. While there is an extensive literature on how activists frame issues, less attention has been paid to how activists frame themselves. Yet, it is clear that who makes a claim—and how that person is perceived—matters to audiences (Benford 1993). Like all social actors, activists engage in impression management by trying to present themselves in a way that they believe will be compelling to audiences (Goffman 1959). In doing so, they frame themselves by presenting a curated version of self that they believe will help to persuade audiences to listen to them. Activists emphasize certain aspects of who they are, giving meaning to their biographies and identities. For example, they may highlight their expertise and credentials or their personal experience to justify their worthiness to make claims on a certain issue. This is important because claims are attached to claim-makers: audiences interpret claims by evaluating the content of the claim but also the credibility of the person making the claim. In doing this, activists reproduce and produce cultural attitudes, beliefs, and norms

4. The interpretation of the Second Amendment as an individual right to bear arms started to become a fixture in the gun debate in the 1990s. It was supported by the *Heller vs. DC* in 2008 (Waldman 2014).

5. Wayne LaPierre, Executive Vice President of the National Rifle Association, infamously stated in a 2012 press conference that “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun, is a good guy with a gun” (Overby 2012).

about who deserves to have a say on issues that impact our society (Schneider and Ingram 2012).

Framing and Standing in Political Debates

Activists frame themselves to achieve standing among an audience, and to convince an audience to listen to and acknowledge one's claims. In courts of law, standing is a qualification that determines who has the right to be heard. To earn the right to bring a case in court, plaintiffs must demonstrate that they have experienced harm, the subject of their complaint is responsible for that harm, and the court has the means and jurisdiction to provide justice (Meyer and Bourdon 2020). Standing can also help us to understand the dynamics of political debates, although the standards and expectations are far less certain.⁶

As with framing, standing in political debates is a dynamic and interactive process. Various actors compete to influence the debate by making a case for why they deserve to be heard, and audiences, such as the media, determine who is worthy. To achieve standing, activists frame themselves. Since standing is dependent on the interpretations and acceptance of audiences, activists present a curated image of self that they believe will convince their audience that they deserve to be heard. To do this, actors frame themselves by amplifying aspects of their identities, experiences, and qualifications that they hope will resonate with their audience and bolster their credibility on a specific issue. For example, activists may make claims to standing based on expertise, personal harm, or as a representative speaking on behalf of a larger constituency. Audiences assess these claims to determine who is worthy of being heard, although there are no codified rules like in a courtroom (Meyer and Bourdon 2020).

Standing has been used in studies of social movements to understand the media's reception to and coverage of actors, organizations, and claims (Gamson and

6. The Supreme Court case of *United States v. Rahimi* illustrates how the rules of standing differ across legal and political contexts. Rahimi was found in possession of firearms while under a domestic violence restraining order and was convicted on federal charges. He appealed his case and claimed standing on the basis of having experienced harm, alleging that being deprived of firearms violated his constitutional rights under the second amendment. To counter this, advocates of gun control argue that victims of domestic violence are at increased risk of harm and deserve to be protected. They make a different argument to standing based on potential harm and expertise, referring to research on gun violence (see Campbell et al. 2003). How these claims are adjudicated—in both legal and political contexts—can influence policy. The rules of standing in court are fixed, but in political debates, the rules are less rigid and reliable, resting in the perceptions of diverse audiences.

Wolfsfeld 1993; Amenta et al. 2012; Laschever 2017). Researchers have previously treated standing as an outcome: an actor, organization, or claim is considered to have achieved standing when given a voice in media coverage. In contrast, I consider standing as a process by focusing on the agentic and strategic efforts of activists to win attention. In addition to framing the issues, activists frame themselves to present an argument for standing.

The Power of Motherhood

Motherhood, or the maternal frame, serves as a powerful platform for women to make claims and achieve standing (Boris 1989; Killen 2019). Activists who frame themselves as mothers portray their activism as an extension of their maternal responsibilities. The maternal frame is powerful because it aligns with the popular cultural expectation for women to prioritize their role as mothers and the accompanying responsibilities, lending claims a degree of "moral legitimacy" (Epstein 1995). Motherhood conveys authenticity, as it is thought to be a natural and inherently selfless role for women; authority, as mothers are understood as responsible for issues related to caretaking, the family, and even the community (Killen 2019); as well as a gendered expertise on issues related to caretaking and the family (Azocar and Ferree 2015).

Motherhood has been used as a basis of standing on a range of actors and issues. This is demonstrated in the organizing efforts of low-income women of color in the U.S. (Boris 1989; Pardo 1990; Naples 1998; Killen 2019) and internationally, such as with the mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, who protest the political persecution and government-sponsored "disappearing" of their children and grandchildren (Schollkopf 2017). Middle class white women also use motherhood to claim standing through campaigns like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (Reinarmen 1988).

Since standing through motherhood is evoked by a diverse set of actors on a range of issues, it is unsurprising that it has been constructed and deployed in varying ways. Race and class shape how women conceptualize and deploy motherhood, as well as how motherhood claims are received by audiences (Boris 1989; Pardo

7. Killen (2019) argues that women of color, and particularly Black women, face constraints in using motherhood as a source of political legitimacy due to cultural stereotypes. Scholars argue that popular cultural ideas about good motherhood center around middle-class white women. This is also significant for the gun debate since poor communities of color are disproportionately harmed by gun violence (see Kravitz-Wirtz et al. 2022). Women in these communities are constrained in using motherhood as a source of political legitimacy, as they may be perceived as bad mothers. Similarly,

1990; Naples 1992; Killen 2019).⁷ In particular, women of color in low-income communities have constructed their identity as mothers to include advocating for the larger community. Constructions of motherhood also differ according to the political orientation of claim-makers, with women on the left using motherhood to advocate for broader communities through a welfare state (Koven and Michel 1993).

In sum, polarized debates are inundated by activists trying to advocate for their position. These activists frame themselves, alongside the issues they advocate for, in a strategic attempt to win the attention of audiences. Activists frame themselves by emphasizing aspects of their identities, experiences, and qualifications that they believe will persuade audiences that they are worthy of being listened to. They seek to persuade audiences that they are deserving of standing, or they have the right to speak and be heard, on a certain issue. Motherhood is a powerful basis of standing and a pliable identity, as it has been used by a diverse set of actors on a range of issues.

Data and Methods

To understand how opposing activists in the gun debate frame themselves and, in doing so, construct meaning around guns, gun policy, and who is deserving of being heard on this issue, I conducted a comparative case study of two opposing activists in the gun debate. I focus on Shannon Watts, representing gun control and Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, and Dana Loesch, representing gun rights and the National Rifle Association (NRA). While case studies tend to position organizations or movements as the unit of analysis, I designate the individual as the unit of analysis to capture how individual activists portray themselves.

Table 1. Self-Portrayals of Shannon Watts and Dana Loesch

	Depiction of Shannon Watts	Depictions of Dana Loesch
Media Interviews	n=31	n=32
Social Media	n=2	n=2
Other ⁸	n=1	n=1

mothers who are victims of domestic violence may be viewed as bad mothers for not shielding their children from the abuse (see McDonald-Harker 2016).

⁸ The “other” category is comprised of (auto)-biographies on organizational sites and speaker’s pages.

	Depiction of Shannon Watts	Depictions of Dana Loesch
Total	n=34	n=34

To capture how Watts and Loesch frame themselves, I focused on how they talk about themselves in media interviews, as well as communications on social media, speaker’s pages, and organizational websites (see Table 1). I collected this data by mining Boolean search results on Google for “Shannon Watts,” “Shannon Watts AND guns,” “Dana Loesch,” and “Dana Loesch AND guns.” I also searched their names on Twitter and LinkedIn. I included all credible sources in which it was evident that Watts or Loesch⁹ were speaking for themselves, or they had control over the narrative. I excluded duplicates, in which the same interview was republished, and news media articles authored by journalists that report on Watts and/or Loesch.⁹ Most of the sample is comprised of media interviews in the form of articles, podcasts, and videos in which Watts and Loesch provide detailed responses to questions posed by media personnel (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of Media Interviews of Shannon Watts and Dana Loesch

	Depictions of Shannon Watts	Depictions of Dana Loesch
Articles	n=16	n=13
Podcasts	n=10	n=5
Videos	n=5	n=14
Total	n=31	n=32

I coded data as it was collected, transcribing videos and podcasts and uploading all documents to qualitative coding software atlas.ti. I used grounded theory, a qualitative approach that emphasizes drawing conclusions from data and looking

⁹ A limitation of this data is the collection process. I collected data by identifying terms of inclusion and exclusion for the sample. I then used Google to collect as many self-portrayals of Watts and Loesch as I could find that met the terms of inclusion. However, acknowledging the vastness of Google, I decided not to keep a record of data that failed to meet the standards of inclusion. Instead, I continued to collect data to the point where I was confident the findings had stabilized, and that the inclusion of more data would not change the results. While not a systematic process, this approach to sampling and data collection is rooted in a qualitative logic that emphasizes identifying high-quality data.

to data to build theory, as opposed to relying on pre-conceived expectations, such as with hypothesis-testing (Glaser and Strauss 1967). By taking this approach, I identified motherhood as a common theme in how Watts and Loesch portrayed themselves while defining and constructing the responsibilities of motherhood differently. I focused coding on portrayals of motherhood, differentiating between individualistic and collectivistic maternal frames. I also noted the extent to which Watts and Loesch frame themselves beyond motherhood to understand what other claims to standing they make, if any. I analyzed the data by looking for consistencies and inconsistencies in how each activist portrays themselves and how this self-portrayal contrasts with that of their opponent.

Motherhood as a Source of Standing

To assert standing in the gun debate, Watts and Loesch frame themselves as mothers. In doing so, they use motherhood to claim a distinct perspective and expertise, rooted in their gendered identity as the caretakers of the family, that merits space in the gun debate. They argue that gun policy is within their scope of their authority because it involves their primary responsibility, the safety and wellbeing of children, portraying their involvement in the gun debate as an authentic expression of their selfless concern for others. Table 3 illustrates the frequency at which Watts and Loesch emphasize motherhood in self-portrayals.

Table 3. Frequency of Shannon Watts' and Dana Loesch's Portrayals of Motherhood

	Shannon Watts, n=34	Dana Loesch, n=34
Mother (to own kids)	97%	50%
Community mothering	35%	9%

Shannon Watts entered the gun debate by creating a Facebook page titled "One Million Moms for Gun Control." Watts consistently describes herself as a stay-at-home mom of five children, suggesting that it was her concern as a mother that led her to become an activist. She often tells an origin story in which she was at home, fulfilling gendered parenting and domestic responsibilities, when she was called into activism. Watts recounts:

I'm a mom of five, and I can remember folding laundry as I was watching TV the day of the Sandy Hook tragedy in 2012. And CNN started saying it looks like there's a school shooting. And it did not look good... That 20 babies and six other educators would be slaughtered in the sanctity of an elementary school was devastating, but then to hear pundits and lawmakers immediately get on television and say...the solution is more guns.¹⁰

Watts uses motherhood to claim standing in two ways: as the responsibility to protect her own children; and as concern for the well-being of all children. To emphasize her personal stake in the gun debate, Watts cites her own children's safety amidst an epidemic of mass shootings. In one anecdote, she describes her son's state of panic after learning that a mass shooter had targeted a showing of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado.

Additionally, Watts contends that her responsibilities as a mother include caretaking of the larger community. She presents mothering as a communal responsibility that extends beyond the nuclear family. In the following excerpt, she describes her motivation to advocate for "our communities... our children."

As a mom, I can no longer afford to sit back and watch the horrible toll that gun violence takes on our communities – particularly for our children...More than 2 million children face this danger every day: easy access to unsecured guns in the home.¹¹

Here, Watts increases her stake in the gun debate by emphasizing her concern for all children who are at risk of suffering harm. In doing so, she stretches the boundaries of motherhood as a source of standing to include concern for a much larger community.

In contrast, Dana Loesch tells an origin story that highlights her start as a "mom blogger," homeschooling her two sons, before entering talk radio and becoming a political commentator. Loesch argues her position on guns is informed by her identity as a mom who is responsible for protecting her children.

10. Bharara, Preet. 2018. "STAY TUNED: Guns, Schools & The NRA (with Shannon Watts)." CAFÉ, Mar 1. <https://cafe.com/stay-tuned/stay-tuned-guns-schools-the-nra-with-shannon-watts/>

11. Watts, Shannon. 2014. "10 Questions: The Gun Debate with Shannon Watts." NBC News, April 19. <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/meet-the-press-24-7/10-questions-gun-debate-shannon-watts-n84756>

I'm a mom, that's why I own guns... I don't outsource my security. I trust in my own skills and training and wish everyone had that same self-confidence.¹²

Loesch suggests that as a mother, she has an inherent drive to protect her own children. As a mother who is armed and capable, she also has the capacity and expertise to do so.

Loesch offers a narrower definition of motherhood than Watts does, focusing exclusively on her immediate nuclear family. Loesch uses motherhood to claim standing as the right to protect her own children how she sees fit, including with firearms. She portrays motherhood in line with conservative understanding as the right to be "free from" government interference. Unlike Watts, Loesch doesn't use motherhood to claim standing over a larger community of children. Instead, Loesch suggests she represents a larger community of parents who believe in the right to protect their children with guns.

Beyond Motherhood

Motherhood is central to the way Watts and Loesch frame themselves, but they deploy it differently. For Watts, motherhood is a primary identity that eclipses other duties. In contrast, motherhood is one among several identities that Loesch amplifies. Watts portrays motherhood as an all-encompassing primary identity while also asserting a "single-issue" focus on gun control. In contrast, Loesch emphasizes motherhood alongside political and regional identities that have racial and class connotations. Additionally, Loesch speaks out on a range of issues, not limited to guns.

To bolster her image as a mother, Watts also dispels any potential "conflicts of interest," such as political or economic motivations that could compromise her credibility. She claims that prior to her awakening as an activist, she stayed out of politics. In a podcast, Watts explains:

I was never politically active in any way, except to vote. I was a corporate communications executive for about 15 years, and when my kids got to be about middle school age, I thought okay I want to stay home, this is when they

12 Loesch, Dana. 2017. *Instagram*, Oct 14. <https://www.instagram.com/dloesch>

get into trouble. And so that's what I was doing... minding my own business in suburban Indiana, and then Sandy Hook happened.¹³

In addition to highlighting her recent entry into politics, Watts presents herself as a non-partisan single-issue voter willing to vote for whichever candidate has the best position on gun control. Often describing herself as a "full-time volunteer," Watts is clear that her efforts as an activist are not remunerated, despite her skill and experience as a corporate executive.

Loesch, in contrast, leans into multiple identities. Loesch describes herself as a member of "flyover nation," a regional identity with race and class connotations.¹⁴ "Flyover nation" is a conservative talking point that references white, religious, and patriotic working- and middle-class people of middle America, which are juxtaposed to coastal elites. As the daughter of a working-class single mother, Loesch claims she learned the value of hard work, family, and religion. During her time spent in the rural Ozark region with her grandparents, she also learned the value of firearms for hunting and self-defense.

Additionally, Loesch is unabashedly political. Loesch portrays her position on guns as a natural extension of her identity as a libertarian or "punk rock conservative" opposed to government overreach. She portrays this as "who she is": an expression of her authentic ideological beliefs that are rooted in her childhood experiences and connection to flyover nation. Loesch explains:

What you see is what you get, I don't put on a front when I go on television... [if] you've been out with me before, you've bowled with me, you know... where I come from, and why I operate the way I operate, and why I'm so passionate about certain things.¹⁵

Loesch refutes profit as a motivation behind her stance on guns, although she is a paid employee of the NRA. Loesch avoids acknowledging her paid status, and instead describes herself as a dues-paying member of the NRA. She implies that

13. Watts, Shannon and Robyn Thomas. 2016. "Shannon Watts: Gun Safety is a Winning Issue." *Commonwealth Club*, Mar 31. <https://www.commonwealthclub.org/events/archive/podcast/shannon-watts-gun-safety-winning-issue>

14. Loesch, Dana. 2016. *Flyover Nation: You Can't Run a Country You've Never Been To*. New York: Sentinel.

15. Loesch, Dana and Guy Benson. 2016. "Afterwords." CSPAN, Jun 20. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?409992-1/after-words-dana-loesch>

her opinions on guns are authentic and not influenced by her employer or financial gains.

Building upon the extensive literature on framing, I argue that activists frame themselves alongside the policies they advocate. In addition to convincing their audience(s) of the worthiness of their position on an issue, activists must convince their audience that they are credible and worthy to speak and be listened to. By emphasizing certain identities, activists make a case for their expertise, authority, and/or authenticity to be heard on a given issue.

Motherhood is an identity that has served as a potent source of credibility for activists in various contexts (Boris 1989; Pardo 1990; Naples 1992). Motherhood is so powerful because it is a role and status valued across communities and cultures. Mothers are known as the caretakers of the family, and they are presumed to have a selfless and unrivaled devotion to their children. They are not paid for the work of caring for their children but undertake this responsibility as an expression of their authentic love and maternal commitment. When activists portray themselves as mothers, they suggest that their position on an issue is merited because of their authority, as those responsible for the wellbeing of children; authenticity, as selfless caretakers motivated by genuine concern; and expertise, as women with a specific set of knowledge and skills.

In some cases, motherhood may be used simultaneously by opponents in a political debate, such as with Shannon Watts and Dana Loesch. Although they both argue that motherhood informs their position on guns, they construct motherhood differently. While Watts envisions motherhood as a communal responsibility, Loesch portrays motherhood as an individual right. These typologies of motherhood are not original but have been used by a legacy of activists before them (Boris 1989). Watts' version of motherhood as a communal responsibility corresponds with other activists on the left, such as in community welfare, anti-drunk driving, and peace movements. Meanwhile, Loesch's vision of motherhood reflects the emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities shared by other conservative activists.

This variation in how motherhood is constructed, and the notion that it can be used by opponents in a political debate simultaneously, suggest the pliability and flexibility of this identity as a platform to make claims. Activists will construct motherhood as it corresponds with other aspects of their identity, political claims, and assumptions about what will resonate with audiences. While some identities may correspond with specific issues, particularly identity-based issues such as immigration and racial justice, motherhood can serve as a source of credibility in various debates.

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Appendix A. Self-Portrayals of Shannon Watts and Dana Loesch

#	Shannon Watts			Dana Loesch		
	Source	Date	Format	Source	Date	Format
1	Pop Sugar	May 6, 2018	Article	CNN	Mar 1, 2018	Video
2	Health	Apr 10, 2018	Article	ABC	Feb 25, 2018	Video
3	Forbes	Feb 23, 2018	Article	CNN	Feb 23, 2018	Video
4	Offspring	Jun 4, 2018	Article	FOX	Mar 6, 2018	Video
5	Mamalode	Dec 14, 2016	Article	Tony Katz Today	Jul 14, 2017	Article
6	NBC	Apr 19, 2014	Article	NBC	May 4, 2018	Article
7	Philanthropy	Mar 23, 2018	Article	The Federalist	Feb 22, 2018	Podcast
8	Insatiable with Ali Shapiro	Jul 19, 2017	Podcast	Conservative Book Club	Jun 23, 2016	Podcast
9	Vogue	Jun 2, 2017	Article	CSPAN	Jun 20, 2016	Video
10	People	Dec 30, 2016	Article	Team Never Quit	Feb 1, 2017	Podcast
11	The Wrap	May 5, 2018	Video	Riverfront Times	Feb 24, 2010	Article
12	End Times Pep Talk	Feb 14, 2018	Podcast	The Glenn Beck Program	Mar 20, 2017	Podcast
13	Salon	Apr 22, 2018	Article	PJ Media	Jul 30, 2011	Video
14	CAFÉ	Feb 28, 2018	Podcast	573 Magazine	Mar, 2015	Article
15	Eclecta Blog	Mar 16, 2018	Podcast	NRA News	Apr 15, 2015	Video
16	The Costa Report	Mar 19, 2013	Podcast	NRA News	Aug 30, 2014	Video
17	Market Watch	Feb 19, 2018	Article	The Glenn Beck Program	Oct 17, 2017	Podcast
18	NPR	Jun 17, 2016	Article	The Glenn Beck Program	Oct 23, 2014	Article

	Shannon Watts			Dana Loesch		
19	Crooked	Jan 5, 2018		Fox	Sep 29, 2015	Video
20	Stir	Mar 17, 2014	Article	Fox New Insider	Mar 1, 2018	Article
21	InStyle	Oct 17, 2018	Video	Newsweek	Sep 27, 2018	Article
22	Comedy Central	Jun 11, 2018	Video	Newsweek	Jun 29, 2018	Article
23	Washington State Indivisible	Feb 21, 2018	Podcast	The Hill	Feb 24, 2018	Article
24	Politico	Aug 7, 2018	Article	RedState	Mar 27, 2015	Article
25	Commonwealth Club	Mar 31, 2016	Podcast	The Western Journal: Conservative Tribune	Dec 27, 2018	Article
26	Mother Jones	Sep/Oct, 2014	Article	The Well Armed Woman	N/A	Article
27	Crooked	Dec 13, 2018	Podcast	CNN	Feb 22, 2018	Video
28	MSNBC	Mar 11, 2013	Video	FOX	Feb 22, 2018	Video
29	Oshman Family JCC	Apr 6, 2016	Video	RealClear Politics	Feb 22, 2018	Article
30	Buildingboy.net	Oct 9, 2013	Article	NRATV	Apr 10, 2017	Video
31	NPR	Jun 17, 2016	Podcast	Politico	Feb 22, 2018	Video
32	Twitter	Jan 10, 2019	Social Media	Instagram	Nov 14, 2017	Social Media
33	LinkedIn	May 4, 2019	Social Media	Twitter	Feb 26, 2019	Social Media
34	Moms Demand Action website	May 4, 2019	Other	Premiere Speaker's Bureau	Feb 26, 2019	Other



Kaylin Bourdon recently earned her PhD in sociology from the University of California, Irvine, where she was also a fellow at the Jack W. Peltason Center for the Study of Democracy. She is joining the sociology department at Carroll College as an Assistant Professor in Fall 2024. Her research interests include social movements, law, and gender. She is particularly interested in the politics of standing in political debates, or who gets the opportunity to be heard on important social problems.

FAMILY RECONSIDERED

by MIRNA NADIA

The heterosexual nuclear family, as a social construct and normative ideal, is a composite of myths and aspirations for many and, in the case of Indonesia, for a nation. It has become the model of an ideal family, as seen in numerous government initiatives, most notably the national family planning program with its promise of happiness and prosperity. Indonesians who grew up in the 1970s–1990s are likely familiar with the program's once ubiquitous slogan, *keluarga kecil bahagia sejahtera*, often translated as the small, happy, and prosperous family.

Predicated on the supposed advantage of a household economy with a gendered division of labor (men as breadwinners and women as unpaid caregivers), the heterosexual nuclear family privileges certain bodies, practices, and relations. It rests upon the binary opposition wherein family ideals are produced alongside the relegation of any other practices and relations as deviants, segregating the privileged and the excluded.

The state, through public policies, affects family choices and household formation. So does the market through its labor and industries (O'Brien 2023). They may normalize and sanction a particular form of family and household while discouraging others. Furthermore, because the family is the primary site of social reproductive labor, the state and market also indirectly impact how care work might be managed and organized.

The hegemony of heterosexual nuclear families is maintained through disciplinary temporal norms that impose certain "life script" concerns about growth, individual and national progress, and heterosexual reproduction. Such a "life script" assumes that there is a proper biographical timeline that follows a linear "straight time" (Boellstorff 2007) or "chrononormativity" (Freeman 2010). It orients bodies to ways of living that are in sync with the dominant narratives of belonging and becoming. Yet, there will always be those who do not fit into this model. These include people who live alone, choose to remain single, and form other types of household arrangements instead of a nuclear family and its privatized household. In these realms of the "improper" and the "unfitting," I see how the experiences of the four subjects presented in this essay confound the dichotomies of progress and decline and success and failure instilled within the dominant narratives.

In contemporary Indonesia, the decoupling between household formation and marriage is underway, albeit slowly. A household is no longer synonymous with the

heterosexual nuclear family. However, most of the households remain in the form of heterosexual families comprising married adults and their children. As of 2022, there were only an estimated total of 4.52 percent of female and 1.49 percent of male heads of households who were unmarried, with the majority of them being under 24 years old (Statista 2024). On average, women get married at the age of 22 and give birth by the age of 23. The figures are only slightly higher in Jakarta, where, on average, women marry at the age of 23 and give birth by 24 (Global Data Lab 2024b, 2024a). For Indonesians, getting married and leaving the parental home are important rites of passage. Adulthood is often recognized only after they marry or provide for themselves leaving their parental home, regardless of age.

Drawing from an impulse to document lives beyond the heterosexual nuclear family, this project centers on unmarried female-born adults residing in and around urban Jakarta. Most of the subjects presented in this essay, although not all, are queer individuals whom I have met through mutual friends and circles. They are either highly educated, well-embedded in queer networks in Jakarta, or both. All had been engaging in jobs that often forced them to grapple with the instability that arises from a lack of long-term and secure employment. The experiences of the four subjects in this essay do not represent all lives outside the heterosexual nuclear family. Rather, the presence or absence of possible subjects and experiences merely reflect those that are more accessible and closer to my own.

What started as conversations among a small group turned into a two-month project of collecting stories and attempting to document parts of their lives. Between October and November 2023, I visited individuals who agreed to participate in this project at their homes to take pictures and conduct short interviews. I relied on using a camera phone to avoid the intrusion of a more conspicuous photographic setup and reduce the subject's stress of having to pose or perform in front of a camera. Photography as a medium reveals, evidently, what the narratives purport. If these photographs are evidence, however, they are inevitably partial. While they give the presumption of veracity that something does exist or once existed, they capture only fragments of mediated reality allowed to be brought into representation by the subjects and bound by my own interpretation and that of the viewers. All photographs featured in this essay are edited using a black-and-white filter to foster coherence in otherwise disparate lives. Such imposed coherence is intended to elude a sense of chronological temporality, suggesting that all exist and are captured in a singular present.

This project involved a process of crafting: there are decisions to be made and certain narratives that unfold from those choices. Some details are blurred, while others are sharpened. After all, it is not only the allure of the supposed truth that drives this project but also my fascination for stories—the every day and the imagined.



MOVING OUT AND APART

At the age of thirty-nine, Ririn lived alone in a spacious one-bedroom apartment in Central Jakarta. Her two cats were her only companions. Unmarried and with no child, Ririn admitted that she enjoys her current living arrangement, even though most women her age are already married and have a family of their own.



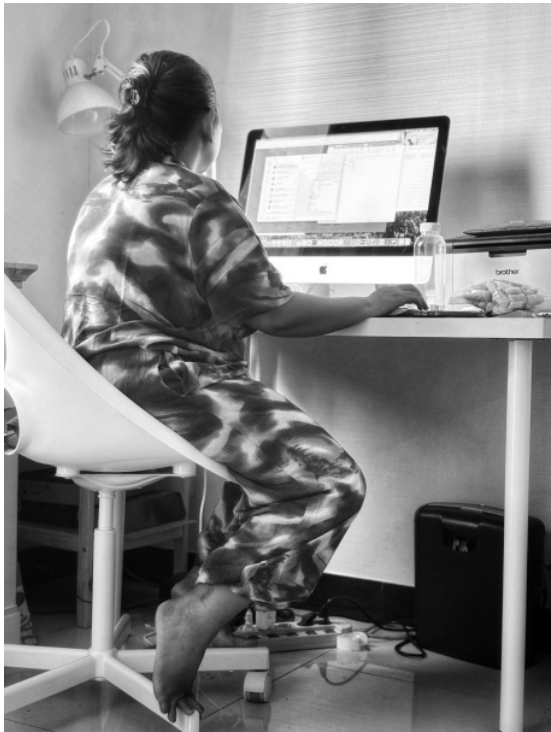
Soon after graduating from university, she moved out of her family home and never returned. She confessed that living alone meant no one would chastise her for making a mess in the apartment or indulging in her hankering to buy numerous pairs of shoes. To her, adulthood came by way of self-sufficiency and being able to funnel money back to her family. Even so, it did not always free her from the familial and social expectations to form a family.





She realized that her unmarried status and reluctance to lean on her parental household meant she would have to depend on continuous participation in the labor market for her survival. At the time of this project, she was in-between jobs, having recently resigned from her post as a project leader for a non-profit organization based in Switzerland, and living on emergency funds while waiting for her next appointment with a better role at another organization.

She felt it was convenient to live alone, noting that many domestic duties, such as cleaning and cooking can be outsourced so long as one has the means. Working families often outsource domestic labor, as they rely on low-wage domestic workers and access to a wide range of service commodities such as meal delivery, laundry, and ride-hailing drivers. She, too, by relying on the service economy avoided the relentless housework that was typically split among household members, often the feminized ones.



Beyond managing care work, not having a family as a source of solace may cause people to feel powerless against the grind of life or fear abandonment at an old age. Still, she chooses not to be concerned about the future and makes the most of what life has to offer her at present, whether or not it involves marriage. “People often incorrectly assume that I avoided getting married. The truth is, I think it would be nice to have a family and have children,” Ririn admitted. The decision to delay starting a family did not necessarily imply a complete rejection of motherhood and family life, or a shift toward solitude. She said that the only thing she wished for was a way to change the “contract” so she could thrive while raising a family. There is nothing extraordinary about wanting and forming a family. Only, she knows that it will cost her more than she is willing to pay.

NETWORKS OF CARE



Bella (26, left in the above image) and Day (31, right in the above image) shared a two-bedroom apartment in central Jakarta. Having attended the same university, they became closer through a mutual connection. Day just ended her employment with an international non-profit organization when she moved in with Bella, whose previous roommate had to return to her family home due to a salary cut. Transitioning into less stable employment and pursuing more freelancing opportunities, Day discovered that living with Bella was a beneficial arrangement because they could share the rent and other expenses. Beyond pooling resources, both admitted that having a friend to talk to at home offers a respite from the long hours of working at their jobs.



2024 VOL. 65



Both unmarried, they sought alternative forms of household life beyond the heterosexual nuclear family, aspiring to foster ways of relating to other human beings that did not exert dominance. They advocate for a vision of collective care, with Day referring to it as a “chain of care” and Bella as the “distribution of care.” Both thought that care work should not rest solely on one person or be confined to private households defined by marital and blood relations.

Initially, Bella and Day planned to remain in their shared living arrangement for a year, but their working circumstances changed within weeks. Bella, who was working for a UN agency, decided to hand in her resignation letter, while a contract termination came earlier than expected for Day. Faced with financial uncertainties, both chose to move back to their family homes. Moving back entails a trade-off, relinquishing some of the freedom they had enjoyed in having their own household, yet both acknowledge the privilege of having a family as a 'safety net' to fall back on. In a setting where they cannot rely on government assistance and strong networks outside of the family, there is no cushioning for the financial blow that comes from such sudden unemployment. One is free, to some extent, to form families or households of their own choice, under the condition of maintaining employment. That is a condition that, time and again, is undeniable.



Reflecting on the pervasiveness of childhood trauma among her peers, Bella saw the heterosexual nuclear family as a fraught institution, emphasizing the importance of building networks aligned with the concept of care collectivization. For her, this would entail unlearning established norms and consciously embracing a different way of life. “This heterosexual nuclear family model is isolating while, as humans, we could have richer experiences. It is not only limiting but also makes us vulnerable to violence. We should problematize this old, established institution, put the norms to the test, and maybe we should ask: What other forms of relationships are possible? What can we do differently? Even if we don’t know if we’ll ever make it, maybe it is worth striving for,” Bella said.

When asked about the possibility of living up to their ideals about care work, family, and household formation, Bella and Day expressed hesitation. Despite these uncertainties, Bella remained hopeful, referencing Bernardine Evaristo's (2019) book *Girl, Women, Other* as a potential blueprint for the life she desired. "The characters in Evaristo's works live within loose networks that span across generations." In her view, that is an antithesis to the privatized, isolating nuclear family and households. "Personal conflicts or clashes of values are inevitable, but there is no imposing moral prescription when it comes to intimate space," she said. While she thought that such a network may not be ideal, she argues that: "It certainly breaks the water and allows for a certain fluidity for people to organize their lives, especially when it comes to forming a family and organizing careworkers or domestic labor." Bella appealed to the many possibilities of togetherness in the layered otherness of the characters in Evaristo's story. A new way of living and surviving in the world outside the heterosexual nuclear family.

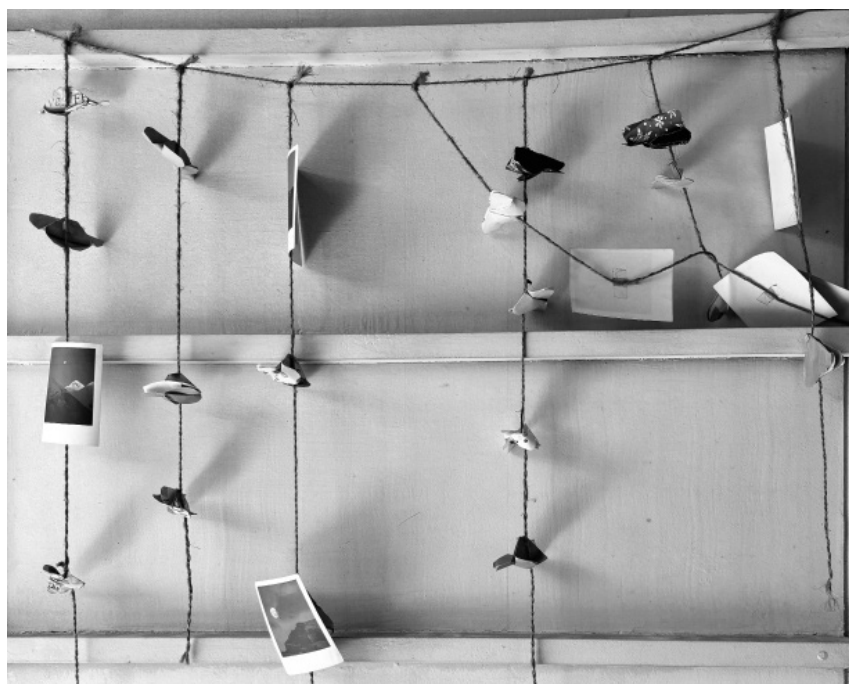


RECOMPOSING A FAMILY



Born in 1982, Jey left their family home early in their teenage years. Leaving what they described as a broken home, they moved around a lot before settling in Jakarta. “The ‘home’ was broken both in a literal and figurative sense,” Jey chuckled. Their family dissolution was soon followed by the demolition of the house. They recalled having to stay with distant relatives and friends who would kindly take them in and treat them well. “I would not call what I’ve experienced menumpang, but you may see that it was,” Jey said. In Bahasa Indonesia, there is a term called menumpang, which roughly translates into the act of staying under someone else’s care. This term often carries a hint of shame. Jey told the stories with fondness, however, saying that they never had to feel ashamed of living with families other than their own. It was these experiences that they wanted to emulate when they finally could offer a home for others looking for a safe shelter.





When Jey came to Jakarta and found supportive networks among friends, they seized the chance to build new ways of living and caring for each other that do not have to conform to the heterosexual nuclear family model with its privatized household. What they envisioned was a communal life where sharing was the rule—whoever had the means to contribute would do so in any way possible, from paying electricity bills to supplying tobacco for their rolled cigarettes. It was a different arrangement from living in a boarding house (*indekos*). While it is common to live with others who are unrelated by blood or marital ties in a boarding house or other types of rental properties, such practice does not necessarily mean a break away from their parental household or family.



Recently, Jey left a former commune and moved into a new place with a partner and two friends who had lost their jobs. Although they realized that pooling resources was necessary to maintain a stable household, Jey never asked the other members to participate in a certain way. In order to support the household, Jey had been working as a ride-hailing driver, and whatever they and the other household members could not afford to pay for was raised through their networks. Not being recognized by the dominant institutions, particularly the state, shrank their options and means to access resources or assistance that they may need in a difficult time. This makes it hard for families or household arrangements that do not follow the heterosexual nuclear family model to survive.

Jey's decision to avoid imposing specific expectations on the other members of the household allowed everyone to contribute in their own unique ways, ensuring a fair distribution of resources and fostering a strong sense of community among them. Moreover, their openness to networks extending beyond the household itself may help them evade the oppressive logic of the private family. By actively seeking support from external networks, they were able to tap into a wider range of resources and opportunities.

This not only strengthens their overall resilience but also puts forward other possibilities other than relying on the state, the market, or the private family for support.

This essay combines criss-crossing narratives of four lives, pigeonholed, to show disruptive practices against the common way of living in Indonesia. It shows people whose bodies, life stories, and experiences are not in sync with the dominant narratives and the biographical timeline of “straight time” or “chrononormativity.”

What propels these adults, along with everyone else, to compose other forms of family and household does not need to be a family dissolution or a catastrophic event. To not feel at ease in their family home could be a signal of the wider female discontents and the beginning of a desperately needed transformation. There is an emphasis on building care networks that elide marital relationships and the reproduction of patriarchal relations. These are networks that do not necessarily entail the practice of coupling (monogamous or otherwise).

The struggle to leave their family and parental household is often perceived as a temporary phase before transitioning into supposedly more stable household arrangements, such as heterosexual marriage. No matter how fleeting, they show practices that attempt to break away from the hegemonic nuclear family and privatized households. To delay, to stop, or to defer disrupts the supposed linear biographical timeline and the dominant narratives geared toward maximizing human productivity. All seek a new composition, a story of their own, so they do not have to reproduce the past.

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NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY: CHALLENGES AND REFLEXIVITY OF A MUSLIM RESEARCHER

by ISTIKHARALI

A Brief History of Surveillance

My thesis delves into Muslim identity within Muslim-segregated areas, investigating its integration into society through an ethnographic lens. It examines the marginalization and health behavior of Muslims, focusing on experiences in South Delhi, India, particularly Jamia Nagar. Jamia Nagar, labeled a Muslim 'ghetto,' witnessed intensified challenges post-'Batla House encounter' in 2008,¹ the 'Shaheen Bagh Movement'² in 2019 against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), followed by a 2020 pogrom and 'Corona Jihad.'³ These experiences reveal a spectrum of marginalization, contributing to a deeper understanding and aiming to illuminate complexities in Jamia Nagar's vibrant socio-political dynamics. As a Muslim researcher, I encountered various obstacles during the data collection in this charged area.

Dynamics of Identities

During the pilot studies in mid-2019, I successfully laid a crucial foundation for rapport and trust-building. These elements were essential for unlocking insights into the study of socio-political chaos. A meticulously drafted plan involved conducting surveys and case studies, utilizing a survey questionnaire for demographic profiles, semi-structured interviews, and field notes, thereby establishing rapport initially through pilot studies. However, this groundwork faced unexpected heightened distrust and disruptions with the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) in 2019.

Initially, everything was progressing according to plan until the spark of the

1. A deeply controversial incident that sparked nationwide debate. This event not only shook the nation but also raised serious questions about the role of the media and police concerning Muslims in India.
2. The Shaheen Bagh movement, originating in a Muslim working-class neighborhood, involves protests against a new citizenship law activists label "anti-Muslim."
3. The COVID-19 pandemic has unfortunately been turned into yet another Islamophobic conspiracy theory in India.

CAB turned into the CAA on December 12, 2019. What began as a disagreement transformed into a movement reshaping perceptions of identity in Jamia Nagar. With numerous visits, I witnessed the dynamics dramatically shifting due to external political chaos.

Jamia Nagar, a significant locale where the movement gained momentum, became emblematic of broader changes in India. The movement's impact wasn't confined to the streets; it permeated the social fabric, creating a substantial gap and fostering misinformation within the Muslim community. This, in turn, manifested in altered behaviors and interactions between individual Muslims and the rest of society.

Despite my persistent efforts to maintain a presence and interact with locals, the protest injected new challenges into the research process. The upheaval led to a transformation in the demeanor of respondents, rendering them unfriendly and unwilling to share information. Social and political consciousness during the protests profoundly affected the community, resulting in a reluctance to divulge details, fueled by both the state's actions and a general unwillingness to share in the wake of heightened tensions.

A Researcher's Reflection

Before extensive fieldwork commenced in October 2019, I meticulously reviewed the methodological tools for data collection and devised a blueprint for the field visit, comprising three phases: pilot, extensive, and leftover data. The completion of the pilot study, informed by feedback, enabled the refinement of the tools. However, before transitioning to in-depth interviews, the spark ignited by the CAA engulfed Delhi, consuming trust and leaving only ashes in its wake.

The ensuing political turmoil abruptly halted my fieldwork, as indefinite protests and demonstrations became the order of the day. Despite ongoing challenges, I continued to visit the field area, driven by a sense of solidarity as a Muslim whose citizenship and identity were now endangered. Acting as a participant observer, I keenly sensed the prevailing fear and uncertainty within the community. While informal interactions with many people occurred during these visits, detailed interviews became an impossibility due to discriminating apprehension and insecurity in the neighborhood.

An emphatic respondent advised me, underscoring the importance of explicitly stating one's Muslim name before initiating any interaction to foster trust. I intentionally disclosed my Muslim identity, behaving as an insider publicly during interactions to establish rapport and acknowledge the sensitivity of the context.

The significance of this approach became evident when even critical informants introduced me based on my Muslim identity, highlighting the effectiveness of building trust through a transparent acknowledgement of cultural identity.

In response to confronting these issues, I discarded conventional tools and prioritized securing verbal consent for interviews and eschewing paperwork. The once-cooperative participants became unresponsive, driven by genuine concerns rooted in the prevailing socio-political climate. The generally amicable locals became wary and reluctant when I, as a researcher, broached the subject of the study.

A Desire for Safety without Fear

The mere presence of an interview guide created fear among locals. I observed growing skepticism among people, extending even to handouts and consent forms. Confronting trust challenges, I prioritized obtaining verbal consent for interviews and avoided cumbersome paperwork. The intricacies of conducting in-depth research became apparent during data collection, posing a formidable challenge without conventional tools. By using pointers or memory aids, note-taking during interviews was minimized, enabling clearer explanations after completing fieldwork.

The Batla House encounter had already heightened social consciousness in Jamia Nagar, but political awareness remained minimal until the 2014 general elections, won by right-wing parties. Despite this, a substantial portion of the Muslim population remained oblivious and uninvolved, grappling with the insecurity and uncertainty surrounding Indian citizenship. Amid these challenges, I found that the circumstances in the field were different and unusual, requiring a reevaluation of strategies.

Undaunted by the uncooperative atmosphere without reference, respondents were hesitant to engage in conversation. Instead, the focus shifted towards a selected area and size of the sample, employing a snowballing approach to trace and approach interviewees. While this method had its merits, it proved inadequate in capturing the full spectrum of marginalization present in the stratified sample, particularly across areas, classes, and genders.

Simultaneously, I adopted a dual strategy, approaching respondents through the snowballing technique and exploring social media for potential references of people who understand the significance of the research, such as activists, professors, academics, journalists, politicians, etc. While these efforts yielded some results, there was still a long way to go in comprehensively understanding the experiences of the community.

Conclusion

The journey from grappling with the complexities of identity and positionality to successfully presenting and interpreting my findings marked a significant enhancement in my research efficacy and endeavors. Adapting methodologies, this research strives to shed light on multifaceted dimensions of marginalization, balancing insider-outsider perspectives. Despite obstacles, the study addresses the transformative impact on community dynamics, emphasizing cultural sensitivity in studying marginalized communities in this intricate socio-political landscape.

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RISK, INFORMED CONSENT, AND PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY: REFLECTIONS FROM AN ABORTED ETHNOGRAPHY

by DYLAN GRAY

In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, hate-fueled mass shootings of Jewish and Black places of worship, violent skirmishes between alt-right pro-Trump protesters and anti-fascist counter-protesters, and scores of other acts of violence caught the nation's attention. Meanwhile, some white nationalist groups worked quietly out of the media spotlight to cultivate an image of respectability by recruiting from middle- and upper-middle-class circles. That is, while news media turned a spotlight on events like the deadly "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, some image-savvy white nationalist activists put on their suits and began recording podcast-style political discussions and "pro-whiteness" conferences intended for young, right-leaning, politically-minded white men. Incidentally, I had been conducting exploratory fieldwork for a course project on political activism on college campuses when I realized that one such group had been making inroads with members of my own university's student republican group. It is nearly axiomatic in research on white nationalist activism that movement involvement facilitates radicalization: studies have documented, for example, how extremists such as Skinheads, neo-Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan produce and maintain extremist subcultures and integrate extremist identities into their individual identities (cf. see Simi and Futrell 2010; Futrell and Simi 2004). We also know that white nationalists recruit and further radicalize like-minded others from personal networks and far-right internet forums (Adams and Roscigno 2005; Burris, Smith, and Strahm 2000). The white nationalist group I encountered, however, sought to moderate overt racism within their ranks, intellectualize white nationalist discourse, and present themselves as ordinary, mainstream citizens. Contradicting popular narratives and media accounts that portray white nationalist activists as predominantly uneducated and working-class, the activists I encountered appeared intent on recruiting from professional middle- and upper-middle-class circles—no doubt a tactic to help cultivate an outward image of intellectualism and "respectability."¹

1. For further reading on addressing misconceptions of white power activists, see Blee (2003) and Dobratz and Shanks-Meile (1997). See also, in the media, "The Secret History of White Power," Sewell Chan with Kathleen Belew, New York Times, May 19, 2018.

To explore these innovative yet concerning presentation and recruitment tactics, I began qualitative fieldwork with the group and embedded myself as a regular member. What ensued was a year-long project during which I employed a controversial methodology, covert participation observation, to maintain my presence in the field. In this field memo, I aim to explore the relationships between our ethical review standards and ethnographic fieldwork, interrogate our conceptions of informed consent and risk, and briefly consider the impacts of ethical ambiguity on sociology's role in the public sphere. At stake here are the societal risks associated with limiting access to difficult fields.

In ethnographic research, researchers must make several methodological decisions to address perennial issues of access, participant recruitment, and relationship maintenance. To sustain meaningful engagement with key informants in the field, researchers must continually explore appropriate courses of action, relying on context-dependent situational awareness and interpersonal competencies. Ethnographers encounter varying levels of access in the field and must work to build rapport with research participants, but groups whose members harbor outright hostility toward inquiring researchers and to social science research more broadly, such as white nationalist organizations, present unique challenges to researchers. These challenges no doubt stem from the political right's entrenched distrust of post-secondary institutions and socially progressive academic knowledge. While I conducted exploratory fieldwork, I openly expressed interest in the organization as a neophyte, but I never disclosed my status as a researcher to group members since I anticipated such disclosure would severely limit my access to the field. Worse yet, I feared that making my researcher status known would put an unwanted target on my back for a broad network of activists, some of whom have documented histories of violence. Shaking hands and regularly meeting with people known to have stabbed and publicly beaten social justice protestors made my concerns all the more real. I thus found that it was necessary to remain a covert participant observer in order both to continue research and to mitigate my own personal risk.

However, I was quickly at odds with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent protocols. The 1978 Belmont Report, a foundational IRB document, stipulates that researchers must provide participants with study information and procedures, ensure that participants comprehend all potential risks and benefits associated with participating in a study, and allow participants to decide whether or not to participate free from undue coercion. These informed consent mandates were designed amidst growing concerns regarding scientific mistreatment of vulnerable populations and ethically dubious obedience experiments, and they were implemented to establish basic rights that protect individual autonomy and voluntariness. Yet, although they were originally developed for use in biomedical and experimental settings, they are standard in fieldwork research today.

IRBs require investigators in all human subjects studies to draft informed consent procedures in their research protocol documents, which typically entail gathering either written or verbal agreement from participants. More recently, review boards have somewhat loosened their requirements by calling for informed consent procedures only in situations in which participants have a “reasonable expectation of privacy.” I had hoped that my research would qualify for this exemption since it often took place in ostensibly public spaces. I found it difficult, though, to make my case because the distinction between public and private is unfortunately not as clear in practice as our protocols would have us believe. Where is the line between public and private, for instance, at a late-night hangout at a public beach with white nationalists, an afternoon meeting in a public library, or a park cleanup outing? Even if my IRB had approved the project (which it did not), there are additional ethical uncertainties our informed consent frameworks do not take into account. Not only is there a great deal of ambiguity regarding what constitutes a “reasonable” expectation of privacy, but an individual’s participation in “public” spaces does not expressly imply willing consent to be studied. It is not clear, for instance, that a white nationalist demonstrating at a public rally would consent to academic analysis and reporting. Additionally, even in cases where the researcher’s status is known, it is unclear whether they must obtain consent from all individuals in certain situations, such as in public venues involving both explicitly consenting confidants and unaware bystanders, and it is unclear how often consent procedures must be conducted over time. Although for me these are moot points, it is worth asking whether our current review processes can handle such dissonance between informed consent theory and praxis.

There was yet another ethical consideration that impeded my work. Human research protections rest on the principle of “beneficence,” where research is approved only if proposed benefits are thought to outweigh any potential risks to subjects. It was difficult to satisfy these criteria in my case since there were few, if any, proposed benefits to the white nationalists I studied. Members of such groups face personal risk due to public pressure for core institutions, such as employers and universities, to remove or expel individuals whose behaviors and affiliations are illegal or otherwise socially sanctionable. I witnessed several members lose their jobs, get kicked out of universities, and experience turmoil in their personal relationships as a consequence of their involvement with the group. (Internet sleuths had skillfully identified white nationalists by name by analyzing photographs from demonstrations and leaked online correspondences). Any published reports of my data, however well-anonymized, could have unwittingly provided amateur detectives with additional identifying information, and I reported this to the IRB as a potential risk. At the same time, the group had had a visible online presence, its members had landed interviews on high-profile cable shows, and they had shown to be well-heeled and rather litigious.

Importantly, IRB staff advised that they must be afforded the same considerations as the disadvantaged and marginalized. I wondered, though, whether our research protections truly operate on a single logic of *vulnerability*, whether we construct vulnerability according to a person’s position relative to power. Do we consider those low in power vulnerable only to stereotyping and exploitation, and those high in power vulnerable primarily to financial loss and reputational damage? If so, how equitable are our risk assessment structures? Risk-benefit analyses are most precisely performed in projects that require variable manipulation, such as biomedical research and psychological experiments, and whose protocols allow researchers to treat participants more or less equally. However, the application of a medical model of risk assessment to naturalistic observational research seems to become much less neat when we consider the social contexts of those we wish to represent in our academic output, hence the reliance on the nebulous concept of “vulnerability” in social science research protections. Thus, more work might be done to systematize its application to better—and more equitably—contextualize and foresee social risks that are not confined to the body or psychological state.

How we handle respect for persons and beneficence in fieldwork research carries implications for the practice of public sociology vis-à-vis other knowledge-producing professions, particularly journalism. Ethics systems in both professions no doubt shape the character of knowledge and the pace at which it is developed. For journalists, ethical standards are primarily enforced through editorial discretion, where editors uphold principles such as source protection, narrative fairness, independence, and public interest in the stories that pass their desks. By contrast, sociologists wishing to report and analyze original data in public forums must obtain IRB approval prior to data collection. Depending on how strictly IRBs handle ethical ambiguities in social science research, then, sociologists may encounter greater difficulty accessing certain types of stories relative to their journalist counterparts. For their part, public sociologists work to incorporate social theory, conceptual understanding, and deep context to contemporary social problems in non-academic venues. But as a consequence of our ethics review standards, public sociology may not be as responsive to developing events as quickly as its practitioners might hope. I had the awkward experience, for example, of sitting on unusable data while reading journalistic accounts of the very people I had written about in my field notes. Whereas ethical quandaries in journalistic reporting, such as whether to release identifiable information or leaked information, may be superseded by special considerations like public interest and accountability, review systems in the social sciences are ill-equipped to handle ethical ambiguities and societal risks, and thus may stall or deny certain types of projects. We might imagine, as a consequence, missed opportunities for sociologists to identify root causes and remediate misconceptions of current political and social events in the overall public sphere.

In the years that followed my initial encounter with the white nationalist group, pro-white sentiment proliferated in right-wing television media, (white) men’s rights personalities and platforms gathered massive online followings, and certain political officials reaffirmed white supremacy’s entrenchment in federal and state offices. In other words, we began to observe white nationalist extremism enter the realm of acceptable public discourse—the same normalization process that was central to the presentation and recruitment strategies I observed in the field. These are the sorts of collective, societal risks—risks of academic *inaction*—that our medical ethics review standards were not designed to mitigate, and they are the sorts of risks that public sociologists might hope to address to advance social justice and equity. How do we proceed if our review standards deem far-right figures and white nationalists vulnerable for the same reasons public sociologists would consider them a societal liability (e.g., power, wealth, notoriety)? To be clear, I do not suggest relaxing our human research protection standards, nor do I wish to mount a defense for covert participant observation. But where sociologists’ ambitions to advance academic knowledge are constrained by our review system’s conceptual and procedural uncertainties, so too are their abilities to apply the tools of the trade to contemporary social problems and to make an impact in the public sphere. Perhaps there are some topics that the profession is not yet equipped to handle.

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HEBA GOWAYED: MIGRATION, THE HUMAN-CENTRIC APPROACH, AND THE FUTURE OF SOCIOLOGY

Heba Gowayed is a distinguished scholar and public intellectual whose research and writing push the boundaries of ethnographic approaches in Sociology and illuminate the human experience of migration, displacement, and borders around the world. She is an outspoken voice for justice, whose advocacy and work have impacted many immigrant communities across multiple countries. We were thrilled to sit down with her for an interview, where she shares how her Egyptian-American background and having a foot in each world shapes her human-centric approach to her scholarship; navigating an insider-outsider perspective while carrying out ethnography; and the future of Sociology as a field.

Janna Huang (BJS): Hi Heba! We are so excited and honored that we get to speak with you today. Just to start things off, we were wondering if you could tell us a bit about your background, your family's and community's background, and also how both of those might have influenced your trajectory into Sociology and your research?

Heba Gowayed: I am Arab American, specifically Egyptian-American. As I write in my methods appendix in *Refuge*, this hyphenated identity is actually a really good way to identify me. I'm somebody who is both Egyptian and American, which is why the hyphen works.

I was born in Cairo, and I grew up in the United States. And then I went back to Cairo for my undergrad where I worked for several years after graduation. 18-year-old Heba thought when she moved back that she would feel that she had gone home, that she would finally feel in place. But when I was there, I realized that I didn't feel that way; I still felt out of place.

I do think that having a foot in each world very much is where *Refuge* comes from. It came from my experience of immigration, the recognition of that feeling of displacement, but also from having had the experiences that life in Cairo afforded me and particularly from having participated in the Egyptian Revolution. Syrians were uprising against their government at the same time we were in Cairo. And for

them, it turned out horribly. I had gone to Syria before - I was part of a public health network that involved Syrian, Lebanese, and other researchers, so for me, it's not just part of my community in theory, but it was part of my community in practice. I knew people who were impacted, I knew people who were there, and I watched on screen in horror as the war broke out. And then as people tried to move towards refuge, in their faces were both the people who I had met, but also my uncles', my cousins', and my own. And so for me, being Arab and having that connection was very much a motivation for the work.

But my identity as an American mattered too. When they were here in the United States, as they were trying to navigate these public services, I was a Ph.D. student at Princeton. So I had the social connections and the cultural capital, to be able to advocate for them in ways that they couldn't advocate for themselves. I had the English fluency needed in order to be able to translate for them. I have the cultural knowledge of the United States, in a way that enabled me to understand their experiences with these various institutions.

And then the other thing, too, is that because I'm American, despite the fact that I grew up in a Muslim family and grew up in an Arab family and understand all the religious and cultural aspects and norms, I was also seen as somebody who wasn't going to judge. So, for instance, when a child was coming out to her parents, they called me. When somebody was caught texting their boyfriend, they called me. When somebody was having conflicts with their husband, or when somebody felt like they were economically unable to send money home, I was somebody who could be a confidante on these various issues because I was both culturally proximate enough to understand but outside enough to not judge and to be somebody who could listen. So I think that from an ethnographic perspective, that positionality really did allow me to sort of have a foot in both places and allowed me to do this work in ways that I wouldn't have been able to if I did not have this dual identity.

Janna Huang (BJS): Thank you so much for sharing that. That really resonates with us here. Our next question is we were interested in hearing you talk a little bit more about how you got started on writing *Refuge*? We know you mentioned this a little bit in your book, but we'd love to hear the story of how this book came to be for our readers who may have not read your book yet but would be interested in checking it out in the future?

Heba Gowayed: After I finished undergrad, I worked in Cairo for several years. I wanted to get my Master's initially, which is why I came back to the United States, in order to get a better position in the policy institute where I was working. I wanted to be a PI rather than somebody who was a research assistant in one of these

programs. I applied and got accepted to the PhD program at Princeton and I was still very much going to do research in Cairo. So I went back. It was the summer before my fourth year, and I went back to Cairo to begin that research. And what happened was that in the post-revolutionary period, there was a retrenchment of authoritarianism, which now has gotten quite bad as we're having this conversation. At the time, the coup d'etat had happened and El-Sisi, who became the president.

At the same time, through my prior connections of working as a researcher before the revolution, I had insider access to this social poverty alleviation program. The plan was to do my PhD research on this project. But, those plans were thwarted as ministry officials worried about what I would write, and through a series of phone calls and messages relayed to me through other people that I would not be safe to stay and continue to do the research. This was horrible because I had set up everything to do this work. And so, I came back to the United States without a project. I came back to New Haven, Connecticut, because that's where my now husband was living at the time. I was on the couch, and we were watching MSNBC. I was kind of moping around, feeling sad for myself, and he was making breakfast. On television, there was somebody who was interviewing Syrian refugees in New Haven, Connecticut. My husband leaned out from the kitchen and looked at me, and I was already googling to see how to get access to this organization. So, I meet them, I tell them a little bit about me and about what I would be interested in doing, that I speak Arabic. And I very quickly got involved with this organization because they needed people to interpret, which presented a whole array of issues of consent, which I deal with in the methods appendix, extensively. But, that's how I got involved in how I began to write *Refuge*.

I do think that having a foot in each world very much is where Refuge comes from. It came from my experience of immigration, the recognition of that feeling of displacement, but also from having had the experiences that life in Cairo afforded me and particularly from having participated in the Egyptian Revolution.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): So your book gives us a deep inside look into the experience of Syrian families seeking refuge in host countries. And then in your appendix, you explicitly mention your positionality as the researcher that gives you both the insider-outsider perspective, which we've been talking about thus far, to the families that we follow throughout your work. As someone who has been educated and employed by one of the world's most elite academic institutions like Princeton, how do you feel your privilege stemming from that educational

background, may or may not have influenced how you studied or engaged with the inequality that you're seeing in your academic work? And if it's even, like, hindered your scholarship?

Heba Gowayed: I'll answer this in a couple of ways. So while I did end up at Princeton, I did my undergrad in Cairo and I went to public schools all my life. And so while Princeton absolutely has a privilege to it from a graduate school perspective, I felt like my privileges were way more my English language, my legal status, my class background, the fact that I grew up in a middle-class family and that my father's a professor... So while Princeton does offer a layer of privilege within the academic realm, for me personally, the privileges that I felt like I needed to grapple with more were the privileges that got me to Princeton, for lack of a better framing.

In terms of being at Princeton, I had a lot of support, I had excellent advisors. The main hindrance, I think, and I think this is something that the department has been facing, trying to face more, is that at the time that I was there, and this is a general problem in Sociology, is that there weren't very many critical theorists there. So when I am trying to think through "How do I understand this issue of refuge from a colonial perspective?" or "How do I understand this issue of refuge from a critical race perspective?" I didn't really have the guidance on that while I was a graduate student, and I actually think that's pretty true across departments, unfortunately, particularly when you get to those top departments, and it's because those are marginalized perspectives, whether they're in our field or outside of our field. So I think that that was an aspect. I think that actually being at Princeton helped me because one of the things that I do care to do, or that I was very intentional in doing is that I tried to use the privileges that I had in order to leverage support for the people that I was speaking to, and this is also something I grapple with in *Refuge's* methods appendix.

So what that meant is that if I email somebody from an @princeton.edu email address, they're much more likely to respond to me, whether that be somebody who works in my congress member's office, or whether that be somebody who works at the social services office, they're like, oh, you're a graduate student at Princeton, it carries a different cache. And I did use that. I used it to the extent that I could, in order to get meetings that I wouldn't otherwise get, get in front of audiences in front of people that I wouldn't otherwise get, in order to support folks who were displaced. So for instance, one way in which this manifested was that they didn't offer the driver's license exam in Arabic. And I tried to advocate and lobby in order to get that test. I think that if I had a different kind of @.edu email address that wasn't as recognizable or didn't carry the same cache, we might have not gotten as far with that advocacy, and not just for my work, but my work in the resettlement

agency and other people's work to offer that driver's license exam. So I think, yes, privilege, but privilege, is also a tool, if used correctly.

Janna Huang (BJS): A thread throughout this book is about taking this human-centric approach, which sort of goes against the dominant camps of immigration research that often focus on race or legal status, or the social networks of immigrants, their social mobility, or about whether or not they're gonna assimilate into mainstream society. So you decided to take this human-centric approach. We were curious if you could just tell us more about this approach and specifically how you came to that? Was that something that your advisors or your cohort mates encouraged you towards? How did you sort of come across and decide to stick with this approach? Was it also from the things that you were seeing from following these families and realizing that you needed to approach your research this way?

Heba Gowayed: I'm going to answer this in two ways. I think that the human-centric approach was the approach that I always took, just by definition of my entry to the people in my book, from the perspective of the community, so I was always much more interested in what they saw, what they felt, and how they experienced things. And part of that as a method of ethnography requires you to do that and another part of that is that I did relate and see myself as a member of their community. Their lives were proximate in some ways. I'm speaking the same language to them. We come from the same area in the world. I had participated in protests that they had also participated in. While they were strangers to me, and while I certainly am not a displaced person from Syria, it wasn't hard for me to imagine myself having to make decisions similar to the ones they did. And so that idea of not being a stranger to people, requires you to see things from their perspective. It builds in a level of empathy and a level of recognition. And so while I think I took the human-centric approach, in the beginning, my question was always: "How do people navigate state services? How do these systems work or not work for these people?" I don't think I recognized it as diverging from how we typically think of immigration, until way later, actually, when I was going through the proofs of the book. That's when I put in those paragraphs in the conclusion, and that's why it only appears a little bit in the introduction, and then in the conclusion.

And even in the process of editing, I recognized that it is actually a divergence from a debate that we've long had about integration, assimilation, incorporation. I'm actually not interested in any of that. I'm just not interested in it and I'm not engaging in any of those conversations. I'm not looking at outcomes. For a long time when I presented the book I talked about this as a limitation of the work that I only look at process because I only look at the first five years. But, with time I recognized that this actually wasn't a limitation of the work at all, it was just a

different perspective to think about immigration altogether. And then once I saw that, I began to recognize that I was not alone in doing that. There were a lot of people doing this. And so I began to cite in that conclusion chapter other people's work who do similar things. Just off the top of my head Neda Maghbooleh does similar things or Jean Beaman, you know, there's a series of people who take the same approach. And it made me recognize that we need to begin to coin this as something separate, a different kind of perspective to think about immigration, than your sort of standard immigration canon.

I think that the human-centric approach was the approach that I always took, just by definition of my entry to the people in my book, from the perspective of the community, so I was always much more interested in what they saw, what they felt, and how they experienced things... And so that idea of not being a stranger to people, requires you to see things from their perspective. It builds in a level of empathy and a level of recognition.

Janna Huang (BJS): We're curious how you're integrating and continuing to pursue this human-centric approach in your ongoing work?

Heba Gowayed: Yeah, so I have aspirations to write an article, maybe a short article that further elaborates on the human-centric approach for use. So hopefully, that is something that I can get done soon. For my next project, the *Cost of Borders* project, I am taking this human-centric approach by looking at borders from the perspective of people crossing them. *Cost of Borders* is a new project that centers people's migration journeys and sees the topography of borders through them. It looks at borders from the perspective of people crossing them.

The idea behind the project emerged when I was doing interviews for *Refuge* in 2015, in Germany. The idea behind *Refuge* was to look at how people do in destination countries. And so, I had all these questions like, "how do you arrive?"; "what is the social assistance?"; "what is the housing assistance that you receive?" etc. But people invariably in Germany wanted to talk about their journeys to Germany. And we spent maybe the first hour at least of the interview, just talking about getting from Syria to Germany. And I recognize that these journeys were expensive, because people paid all the smugglers, taxi fees, boat fees to get from place A to place B, those expenses differ depending on the month, and sometimes the week that you traveled because enforcement changes day to day, week to week, they also differ depending on who you were. So families ended up paying more

money, single women travelers paid more money, but young men traveling alone could pay less money in some ways or more money in other ways based on how they were racialized at the border or their physical mobility and bodily autonomy to travel. And so it made me recognize that actually, the journeys had much less to do with state sovereignty, had much less to do with where the borders are drawn on a map, and much more to do with these expenses, with these costs, and whether or not people could pay the costs.

The costs are a function of smugglers, who are there to help people sort of traverse these border zones, but also they're the result of different kinds of expenditures, which are the state expenditures on maintaining these borders, such as enforcement, industry, private prisons, private courts, or facilities that are at these borders, as well as the proliferation of AI, the use of robots, and the use of radar to manage the border. This is also a big conversation because Israel, of course, is a major exporter of this kind of AI to other places in the world. And so as we think through these things, you recognize that the border itself is actually a series of costs, it's an economy rather than a sovereign line. So this project centers it by looking at borders from the perspective of the person on the move, examines them as a concatenation, as a series of these costs that sort of come together in spaces.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): There's a dynamic that also exists in academia, where there's a bit of tension and a pushback against social justice-oriented approaches. People say that's not really methodologically, or scientifically, sound, or that we're taking it too personally. And then simultaneously, we push back and say well the personal is political. So how do we keep maintaining that work, especially in academia?

Heba Gowayed: Where I stand on this is that if you are seeing people who are experiencing these difficulties on a day-to-day basis, and you're making the decision not to try to help them when you know, for sure that you cannot fix the structural conditions that result in this. But, you know, if you're not doing everything in your effort to support them, in addition to reporting on what's happening, I just don't think that's an ethical decision. And so when we think about our ethics, our morals, and our research, I think that the questions that gets overlooked is what do we owe people? And again, to the question of privilege, any privilege means that it's at the expense of other people, right? When we think about these things, they're intertwined. So how is it that we then can rectify and repair some of the damage that has been done in getting us to where we're going? I think it's by supporting other people and consistently thinking about our role and our responsibility towards others.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): Totally. I hope to live in a world where that truly does become the norm for everyone in Sociology.

Heba Gowayed: I was concerned about pushback, but I honestly haven't gotten that much. You know, some people have things to say but I don't actually care about what those people think, and for people who I care about what they think, I haven't really gotten that much pushback. You just have to own what you're saying. And the thing is because there's more of us now, in academia, there are people who are going to select you because you were the person who said X or did X. And there are people who are going to shut the door in your face, because you were the person who said X and did X. And honestly, you don't want to be around the latter, you don't want to be their colleague, you don't want to have your tenure reliant on them. And so I think these are important decisions to make. I mean, I think the biggest advice that I can give grad students is not to write or do anything scared. It's just not worth it.

When we think about our ethics, our morals, and our research, I think that the questions that gets overlooked is what do we owe people?...So how is it that we then can rectify and repair some of the damage that has been done in getting us to where we're going? I think it's by supporting other people and consistently thinking about our role and our responsibility towards others.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): As we all know, there's a lot of displacement happening in Gaza. And so if we lived in a perfect world, where policymakers actually listened to sociologists, how do you think that Sociology could contribute to the current political moment, and how do you navigate even the politics within Sociology?

Heba Gowayed: Yeah, I mean, I think that we still have not had the American Sociological Association issue a statement for a ceasefire. We are at a very basic level here. We study inequality. We study race. We study genocide, we study war, we study displacement. We study these things, right? This is what we do. We study social inequality, social structure, and dehumanization. And we can't issue a ceasefire statement, with over 30,000 people dead, 10,000 of whom are children! So I mean, I can tell you a lot of things Sociology could do, should do, but we're just not even at a 101 here, and it's devastating. It's 120 days in! I am disappointed because I expect better and I expect more because I do think that Sociology has an important role to play because I think we are a discipline that takes structure and inequality very seriously, where critical approaches are central to the foundation

of our discipline, where they motivate a lot of our work, where it is a place where people have very interesting and important things to say about colonialism, decolonization, migration, mobility, war, that I expect better, right? And so I am sad and disappointed at the current state that leaves us in a place where we are very, very far behind other disciplines who have issued similar statements. Now, I am heartened by the fact that a letter did go out from sociologists in support of Palestine and that it has thousands of signatures and the majority of those were students or the people coming up. So, as we're sort of thinking about what this discipline looks like, I think that the future is bright, or brighter than the present and so I am heartened for our future. But I am disappointed with our present. And I think that those things work in ways that are structured against minoritized candidates. Also, there are people out there who have said publicly that they are keeping a list of the names and will be checking and will you know, actively use it to block people from opportunities and I also call those people out.

And so we're in a very sad scenario right now, where still, the discipline is very lopsided. And we have a new cohort of people coming up who do take seriously their scholarship and its impact on the world and recognize the humanity of the people who they're studying and want to center the humanity of the people they're studying. So back to the human-centric approach, there's a real opportunity and that's actually not even that new because when we place it in the context of the DuBosian approach; it's to think about where people sit in social structure as you talk about them, and how social structure works for them. So as we have a reclaiming of that, of Black feminist thought, as we have a re-centering of our discipline towards something that already existed, as there are more of us awakening and embracing this perspective, I think there is an opportunity for a better future, but I'm just disappointed at our present, I have to say.

Janna Huang (BJS): I think that's what really motivates Tiffany and I to be continuing to run one of the only graduate student-run sociology journals, and we do have this focus on Public Sociology. In your own practice, how have you tried to bridge your academic scholarship with wider audiences, whether that's communicating this book back to the people who were part of this research process, or what are some other ways have you tried to make your research accessible to audiences outside of academia?

Heba Gowayed: In terms of audiences, this work is very much targeted, not to the people who are part of the project. So, you know, they know what they're enduring. They know what they're going through. We've had a lot of conversations about it, but I'm not writing to them. I'm writing to a couple of different people, I'm writing for other scholars of color, particularly up-and-coming, who I hope can

be inspired by this work to do work in their own communities and in places where they find community, or people who they feel connected to. I am writing for a policy audience in order to show them, to demonstrate to them, what the lives of people are like. And I'm writing to sort of the general interested reader who doesn't know anything about this. And to that end, another thing that I do is I write a lot of op-eds and I do podcasts wherever I'm able, and I also have done work with policy organizations. So I've had a lot of conversations with voluntary agencies who work with resettlement, both formal and informal. I also give webinars where I'm asked, and that is something that I see as part of my responsibility to disseminate sort of the knowledge that's been created here. And I do, as you know, a lot of Twitter advocacy, that's where I yell, I like to say, and so I use that mostly for advocacy and for politics. And so those are the ways that I think about disseminating my research more broadly. I also will consult for different agencies, if they're doing work with immigrants, or with refugees or displaced people, though I'm a little bit careful about that because whenever you consult for people, they have their own interests. So, I do less of that just because of the political dimension of it.

At BU, I started a citizenship clinic. At this clinic we taught people who are formerly displaced, but actually, any immigrant, how to take the US citizenship exam. And I've written about how the US citizenship exam is actually a tool of exclusion. It's very expensive, has really stupid questions, really racist questions, has a very rigid understanding of American history, and it requires you to speak English in order to take it despite the fact that we don't actually have English learning support for new arrivals, particularly for displaced people. And so, growing up an immigrant, to the issue of community growing up in an immigrant community, I knew a lot of aunties, who did not speak English, and who passed that exam. And so I recognized that you can kind of teach the exam, and that's what I did. So I started this citizenship clinic, where I trained undergrads who are taking Arabic classes, who are learning Arabic, to train people who are displaced on taking the exam. So for people who were seeking American citizenship, those who were taking the exam, it was like a language exchange, because they were also teaching them English phrases. And I had 13 people by the end pass the citizenship exam from that program. And that came out of a recognition of the English language issue, recognition of the citizenship issue, people actually reaching out to me saying, I don't know what to do about this. I also got them connected to a lawyer in Connecticut who was able to file their issues, because there was an issue of access to a pro-bono lawyer. And so that's one thing that I did after the book was done to sort of focus and give back to that particular impacted community. But also, you know, expanded it to others, because I did this online, so I was able to support both the people in New Haven and other people around the country who needed the support contemporaneously.

Janna Huang (BJS): Wow, yeah, that's awesome. Tiffany and I are both graduate students and a lot of graduate students follow our journal. We're wondering as we're building up our research and building up our academic skills, what can we do now as graduate students to make sure that we're not isolated in our academic bubbles and really just continuing to be engaged in our communities?

Heba Gowayed: I think the issue with graduate school is that you're basically taught that there are scarce jobs, you're constantly vying for people's attention, whether that be faculty in your department, whether it be positions outside of your department, postdocs, jobs, etc. And the thing about it is that you're not actually in competition with anyone, right? Like, the job that's coming for you is coming for you, the one that's not coming for you is not coming for you. I encourage all students to think about alternative, alt-academic jobs, just because academia has shrunk in terms of what it's able to offer students. I highly encourage folks to think about other pathways that they could take, other pathways that would bring them joy. And I feel like once you recognize that you're not in competition with people, that there are other pathways out there, that you need to sort of center your own mental health, the project that excites you and interests you, the people who are important to you, that is a great foundation to create community and create relationships, friendships, right, not just relationships around work or writing, but friendships, people who you can actually go to for social and emotional support. That's so critical and so important because the people who are with you in your cohort are going to understand what you're going through as a graduate student, what the pressures that are in front of you.

People like to write about how academia is catty and petty, and the review process etc, and I've had my fair share of that . . . Like, I've had shitty reviews that were clearly somebody who just didn't like me. But I derived a lot of support, and I have had the best advocates from other people in academia, particularly other people of color in academia, and other immigrants, who have supported me, advocated for my career, pushed me forward, mentored me, befriended me, and are good friends of mine. So I really think that there is a lot of love and camaraderie, even

Sociology has an important role to play because I think we are a discipline that takes structure and inequality very seriously, where critical approaches are central to the foundation of our discipline, where they motivate a lot of our work, where it is a place where people have very interesting and important things to say about colonialism, decolonization, migration, mobility, war.

alongside some of the other more negative aspects. And I think that, if we approach academia like any other kind of job, but at the same time as something that is a little bit more all-consuming, particularly when you're in grad school, that we can find those connections and create healthy environments for ourselves that aren't as pernicious as people like to make out this sort of this image of like this cutthroat, negative, catty environment.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): You mentioned a little bit about *Cost of Borders*. Is there anything else that's exciting that you're working on that you'd want to share with people?

Heba Gowayed: I talked about the *Cost of Borders* project, I talked a little bit about the human-centric migration project. I'm co-authoring on a project looking at resettlement across the United States. So you know, one of the limitations of Refuge is that it does take a country approach. But actually, resettlement does differ across the country. And so I'm working on that, hopefully out soon. And then I'm working with Julie Dahlstrom, who is my colleague at BU on a series of articles on human trafficking in the United States, particularly the use of the T-visa.

navigating a very difficult and inhospitable migration system in the United States, and at the same time trying to sort of restart their lives, how do you access legal support, how do you get access to this T-visa, which is a sort of coveted destination, when your legal status is precarious, when your travel to the United States is reliant on other people, and you've experienced some form of violence through this trafficking process? And so that's another project that I'm working on that I'm really excited for.

So, taking an approach that recognizes, survivors of trafficking as people who are navigating a very difficult and inhospitable migration system in the United States, and at the same time trying to sort of restart their lives, how do you access legal support, how do you get access to this T-visa, which is a sort of coveted destination, when your legal status is precarious, when your travel to the United States is reliant on other people, and you've experienced some form of violence through this trafficking process? And so that's another project that I'm working on that I'm really excited for.

Tiffany Hamidjaja (BJS): Our last question is who or what is inspiring you these days?

Heba Gowayed: Oh, my goodness. I have so many answers to this. From a writing perspective, I'm always inspired by James Baldwin. I'm particularly inspired today because I've been reading a lot of his writing on race, but also on Israel and Palestine,

and I think that he just had this incredible insight and he is also somebody who connects the personal and the general, the political. I'm a big fan of Baldwin. I'm inspired by Palestinian people who are advocating for Gaza from within Gaza, who are maintaining a level head despite all that they're enduring and going through, and nobody should have to endure that, nobody should have to go through any of this. And I hate the hero narratives that get attached because I feel like it turns people from human beings who are just like us into something that is extra human, which is just not true. But I am inspired that they find the ability to continue to persist and shout and keep their moral compass, and advocate for their people and I think we can all learn from that. And I'm inspired by the number of people who signed onto the sociology for Palestine letter, I'm inspired by what the future of Sociology looks like. I'm inspired by you all, by the diversity that's coming up, by all the people who are committed to social justice, and who are looking to change the discipline through micro-interactions like this and also through rethinking our theoretical framings, rethinking our empirical conceptions and centering humans in our work.

Janna Huang (BJS): Thanks so much for sharing!

Heba Gowayed: Oh, this is great. Thank you so much!



Heba Gowayed is an Associate Professor of Sociology at CUNY Hunter College & Graduate Center. Her research and writing centers the lives of people who migrate across borders and the unequal and often violent institutions they face. Her award-winning book *Refuge* (Princeton University Press) takes readers into the lives of displaced Syrians who sought refuge in the US, Canada, and Germany. She is currently working on her second book, *The Cost of Borders* where she argues that borders, rather than markers of sovereign territory, are marketplaces comprised of always costly, and often deadly transactions. Moving from Lesbos, to Gaza, to Tijuana, the project shows how the costs of borders, patterned by inequalities of racism, sexism, and disability, fluctuate over time and space, and differ depending on who is attempting to cross. She is published in academic journals and outlets including *Slate*, *Al Jazeera English*, *The New Humanitarian*, and *Teen Vogue*, and had her work featured on podcasts including her favorite one Code Switch.

NEOLIBERALISM IS DEAD – OR IS IT?

by AABID
FIRDAUSI

Is neoliberalism dead at last? This is an urgent question that needs some provisional resolution – not just because of the proliferation of excellent scholarship on the variegated forms and consequences of global neoliberalism, but also because the question has political and strategic value in understanding capitalism as it is today. Scholars have been marking the implosion of neoliberalism since the 2008 financial crisis, but the pandemic, climate crisis, and geopolitical instability have precipitated what is now popularly called the “polycrisis” (Tooze 2022). Occupy, the Sanders-Corbyn campaign, Black Lives Matter, the feminist strike, an apparent resurgence of unions, the Pink Tide, and mass protests for Palestine seem to have revitalized progressive mass politics. The resurgence of economic nationalism in the US – through the Trump tariffs and Biden’s unprecedented Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), not to mention American policy-elites proclaiming a New Washington Consensus – has further reinforced this idea that the state is back (Golub 2020, Levitz 2023).

What do we make of the current conjuncture and what implications does it have for neoliberalism as we know it? This requires us to grasp the historical specificity of our moment without losing sight of the structural/organic tendencies of capitalism – conjunctural analysis through a Gramscian lens is best suited for this (Gramsci 1971: 178-79, also see Hall 1988; Hart 2024). Conjunctural analysis is neither a purely theoretical exercise, nor is it a descriptive mapping of different events at a particular moment – instead, it is historically rooted, stretches theories in the Fanonian sense, attempts to make sense of the multi-faceted complexities of our dynamic present, and is geared towards counter-hegemonic movement politics.

This would require us to analyze whether there has been a concrete shift in the balance of power between socio-political forces and whether there has been an ideological shift against the hegemonic “common sense” underpinning neoliberalism. Fanon (1963: 40) famously argued for stretching Marxist analysis in the colonies. Likewise, we need to stretch our analysis of neoliberalism in two ways. First, any conjunctural assessment of neoliberalism or post-neoliberalism should move beyond assessing shifts solely based on state investment or the lack thereof. Second, as Hart (2024) argues, Gramsci’s conjunctural analysis is inherently comparative and relational – and since neoliberalism has been a global project that unfolded (and was imposed) unevenly, we must situate the debates on the death of neoliberalism beyond the North-Atlantic, and grapple with the relations between different sites under global capitalism. This essay is an invitation to think along these Gramscian lines, to see what the conjunctural method can offer to make sense of what on the surface-level seems to be a break with neoliberalism, but in several important ways, it is not.

Within the Core – What Changed?

The starting premise of such an analysis would be to accept that the complexity of the moment cannot be reduced to a single cause, that is, the conjuncture is “overdetermined”. Neither the origins nor the demise of our current conjuncture can be reduced solely to one explanation – thus neoliberalism is not just about state regulation/de-regulation. Rather, as multiple scholars of different persuasions have shown, it is best seen as a multifaceted social project built on a particular configuration of political, economic, cultural, and social axes of domination. Neoliberalism is a set of spatial political-economic policies that empowers global capital at the expense of labor through privatization and de-regulation (c.f. Harvey 2005); it is a legal-institutional project to protect the interests of the globalized investor class against democratic pressures (c.f. Slobodian 2018); and it is an uneasy ideological project that involves a cultural compromise of refashioning of one’s identities as competitive entrepreneurial subjects in the cosmopolitan global economy (c.f. Brown 2003) along with the reproduction of traditional forms of gendered and racial domination in the realms of production and social reproduction (c.f. Cooper 2017; Kundnani 2021).

The sheer diversity and complexity noted above have led some critics to argue that neoliberalism as an analytical concept is confusing and hence useless (c.f. Dunn 2017), but this multi-dimensionality can serve as a point of departure for conjunctural social theorizing to inform counterhegemonic politics of various kinds. Neoliberalism is sustained as a historic bloc in the Gramscian vein, through contradictory coalitions between economic, political, and cultural actors that are often unstable, which opens cracks that can be exploited by different collective actors.¹ Along these lines, Nancy Fraser sees Trump as a reactionary version of neoliberalism as opposed to the progressive neoliberalism articulated by Clinton and Obama, and the Biden administration as a compromise with the progressive populist bloc of Sanders (Fraser 2021). This compromise is especially stark when it comes to the climate provisions of the IRA, a deal struck between West Virginia’s Joe Manchin and New York’s Chuck Schumer. The IRA’s climate provisions effectively appeal to the “professional-managerial class” through its EV tax credits and residential clean energy tax credits, but more importantly, the vast majority of the clean energy investments have flowed into right-to-work states where unionization is extremely difficult. And as political economists like Daniela Gabor (2021) have pointed out, the American state still does not have effective disciplinary power over

1. The concept of historical bloc is intimately related to Gramsci’s analysis of hegemony. Stuart Hall, who analyzed Thatcherism as regressive modernization, reminds us that hegemony is a constant project that is made and remade by the coming together of contradictory social forces. “The notion of a ‘historical bloc’ is precisely different from that of a pacified, homogeneous, ruling class. It entails a quite different conception of how social forces and movements, in their diversity, can be articulated into a set of strategic alliances.” (Hall 1988: 170) Conjunctural analysis thus forces us to take seriously the particular and sectorally specific interests of various fractions of the capitalist class, and how they articulate with relations of oppression based on social difference.

capital; instead, the state bribes certain fractions of capital to crowd in investment through subsidies and incentives – Gabor refers to this as the Wall Street Consensus.

Biden's industrial policy is certainly a detour from textbook neoliberalism – but to decisively say this means we have moved beyond neoliberalism (i.e., post-neoliberal) is predicated on the false assumption that state intervention is always antithetical to marketization. What matters the most is the nature of the state intervention – thus, while eco-socialists have always pushed for a greener welfare state and public investment in care infrastructure, their fall-out with the IRA suggests that the state-capital hybrid re-articulated a diffident neoliberalism with mercantilist elements with national security as the primary concern, this time through the terrain of climate.

That the real inflation reduction was pursued by the Fed through attempting to deliberately engineer unemployment shows that the lineages of monetarist neoliberalism remain central to the American political economy. And even as unions have resurged amidst a pandemic-induced hot labor market, and an intersectional labor movement seeks to build rank-and-file militancy, labor has not yet become a coherently organized bloc that can undo neoliberalism.

Beyond the Core – More of the Same?

Reshoring supply chains coupled with the IRA can be seen as the American state-capital hybrid's long overdue neo-mercantilist “fix” to the fragilities of just-in-time supply chains, and it is articulated through the lens of national security, environmental sustainability, and geopolitical tensions.² The flouting of WTO norms by the American state much to the distress of European allies along with the unconditional aid to Ukraine and Israel has further eroded the legitimacy of American world leadership. This is a contradictory geopolitical conjuncture – just as China remains integral to the green transition through its dominance in EV battery production, the US Dollar remains integral to speculative global finance. Without an overhaul of the global financial architecture at least through a transitional phase of capital controls, proclamations of post-neoliberalism seem to be premature.

While a few global southern countries from Mexico to Indonesia have exploited the cracks in the US-China trade war, the green transition as is envisioned only reinforces the extractive model that most of the raw-material-producing countries

2. Supply chain disruptions and product shortages had triggered intense debates over the future of production, but a recent report (Young 2024) shows that retailers are in fact returning to the pre-pandemic just-in-time method of managing inventories, in contrast to the more shock-proof just-in-case method of stockpiling reserves.

have been familiar with since the time of the British empire. This is more concerning given that the green transition is especially material-intensive compared to carbon-intensive infrastructure minerals like lithium, nickel, cobalt, manganese, and graphite for EV battery production, and copper, zinc, nickel, chromium, and rare earths for offshore wind parks. Mining companies are at the forefront of reaping dividends from this emergent commodity supercycle – and we are likely to see a sharpened articulation of indigenous eco-politics that collides with the dominant state-capital-led transition.

The resource-intensiveness of the attempted green transition, when coupled with the challenges faced by labor in the global South, raises even further concerns. While industrial supply chains have re-articulated what Du Bois referred to as the racialized global color line through global labor arbitrage since the 1970s, the burgeoning service sector since the 1990s has conjured up false imaginaries of a high-tech knowledge economy. In reality, the service sector encompasses a heterogeneous set of informalized economic activities where workers are under-employed at extremely low wages. Much of the global south remains mired in a structural trilemma of stagnant manufacturing growth, environmental catastrophes, and a shrinking working-age population (Oks and Williams 2022) – the green transition in the North-Atlantic does little to address these.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2011) has called the neoliberal state an “anti-state state” – where the repressive apparatus of the state has grown while welfare services remain underfunded – leading to an organized abandonment of racialized surplus populations. The “return” of the state in strategic industries is historically specific to this geopolitical conjuncture – while this has certainly opened up space for contentious politics within the core (and possibly a formation of a nationally-oriented progressive bloc), this does not automatically imply we have moved beyond neoliberalism. As a brutal reminder, Oxfam recently estimated how even as the IMF encouraged spending on public goods in the global south during the pandemic, it was undermined significantly by its austerity drive (Kentikelenis and Stubbs 2023). Neoliberalism is global, and talks about post-neoliberalism should be global as well – with all its variegated specificities.

Globally, Neoliberalism Continues

In sum, states intervene all the time. Unprecedented state investment within the capitalist core in strategic industries amidst escalating geopolitical tensions cannot be seen as evidence for the death of neoliberalism. Even within the US, where the post-neoliberalism thesis enjoys the most purchase, we have neither seen a sustained systemic challenge to oppression based on social difference nor have we seen the

erosion of the hegemonic neoliberal common sense. Instead, the most progressive forms of state intervention have redirected investment to right-to-work states and geared green consumption towards the more educated and wealthier sections, with very few indications of a radical transformation towards public welfare.

Though we see various kinds of state intervention around the world, this has neither broken the stranglehold of global finance nor the North-South inequalities that are integral to global trade. Instead, global economic governance institutions have sought to accommodate these state interventions within neoliberal considerations of market-price stability (Alami and Taggart 2024). The green transition has deepened concerns that the state is incapable and/or unwilling to discipline private capital, without which the large majority of the informalized working class would not see a reversal of their grim fortunes – this perpetuates what I referred to in this essay as “diffident neoliberalism.” The conjunctural question is, therefore, to analyze the ways and forms in which neoliberalism has adapted to the emerging geopolitical and environmental concerns, even as we remain open to the ways in which its contradictions can be leveraged for counter-hegemonic politics.

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IMAGINED CRYPTO: SENATORS' MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND PROJECTIONS ON DIGITAL ASSETS

by ALEXANDRA
BUCHER

In November 2022, FTX, the third largest crypto exchange platform collapsed and its CEO, Samuel Bankman-Fried, underwent trial in October 2023 for seven different charges of fraud. How did this happen? How could one of the main actors in the crypto industry not comply with U.S. laws? The answer is that there is no federal regulation for digital assets and exchange platforms in the United States. Some states have issued crypto-specific legal frameworks, and federal agencies — mostly the SEC, CFTC, and FinCEN — are doing enforcement based on legislation on securities and commodities that they apply to cryptocurrencies on a discretionary basis. But since the first hearing held in the Senate in 2013, a *status quo* has remained in which no coherent federal legislation was passed for digital assets.

The U.S. Congress is well known for this legislative status quo. In a typical two-year Congress, 8,000 bills are introduced, and only 400 are passed into law. Overall, two explanations for the gap between introducing and passing policy are salient: the fragmentation of power in Washington and the scarcity of attention (Baumgartner and Jones 2005). Policy is more likely to change when attention is brought to a specific question by external events, and how this question is framed in committee hearings and discussions in the meantime influences its ultimate policy trajectory (Baumgartner et al. 2009).

The digital assets industry has been attracting Congress' attention for a long time. Hearings were held after the dismantling of the fraudulent Silk Road platform in 2013, in 2019 when Facebook announced their cryptocurrency project, and with the collapse of FTX in 2022. More than 50 bills have been introduced on taxation, central bank digital currency, and for regulatory clarity, but no law that legislates digital assets uses, markets and platforms has been enacted. In this study, I focus on the framing of digital assets in Congress. I hypothesize that if external events, which are the main reason for undermining the status quo, have not triggered policy change in Congress yet, then perhaps looking into the internal framing of the question will be of some help. Here, I argue that digital assets are subject to narratives and representations so incompatible with each other that they participate in blocking the policy-making process in Congress. I show that these representations are fueled both by uncertainty towards the future, and the technicality and pliability

of cryptocurrencies that both confuse policymakers *and* make it possible to insert these objects in a variety of different narratives that support diverging political goals. I use narrative analysis as a tool to understand both the representations held by Senators and how these narratives reveal the visions of economy and finance that Senators and witnesses display. Understanding the issues involved in regulating digital assets is necessary to be able to defend everyone's interests in the face of this new financial instrument.

Focusing on economic representations of the future, Beckert argues that "imaginaries [. . .] are a crucial element of capitalist development" (2016:6). As the future is uncertain, representations become "interpretative frames that structure situations through imaginaries of the future states of the world and of causal relations." Because framings guide actors' actions, they can be shaped into narratives of the present and the future to encourage certain types of actions over others. Blockchain communities, exchange platforms, and interest groups use disruptive terms such as "financial revolution" and "innovation of the future" and thereby construct a narrative where digital assets would considerably improve everyone's life (Faustino 2019). They propose narratives of the development of technology, the economy, of finance, and define what Congress should or should not do to allow the realization of this projection. While digital assets advocates view blockchain and cryptocurrencies as a profitable innovation and miracle solution to a series of problems (underbanking, financial crime . . .), its critics point out that it is precisely the type of innovation that can bring fragility to the financial system. For this reason, carrying out a narrative analysis is crucial to understanding the representations of digital assets and the economy at stake in the policy-making process of digital assets.¹

What are Digital Assets?

Digital assets rely on blockchain, a principle that was created with Satoshi Nakamoto's Bitcoin white paper published in 2008. Central to blockchain is the asymmetrical dual key system which supposedly allows blockchains to be transparent, and the system of blocks also makes it impossible to modify, hence the appellation "trustless" — there is no need for trust since the system ensures that the transaction will occur.

The momentum of this publication, during the 2008 crisis, accentuates the narrative according to which cryptocurrencies and blockchain were created at that moment to defy the traditional trust institutions (banks, insurances, and States). It is however

1. This paper is part of a work in progress: I am dedicating my master's thesis to the digital assets policy-making process in the United States, as part of my second year of master at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and Dauphine University.

part of a tradition of technological and ideological research in cryptography dating back to the 1990s: the "cypherpunk movement," computer scientists who invented asymmetrical dual-key cryptography to preserve personal information in the context of a growing numeric environment (De Filippi 2018). The invention of an anonymous and decentralized payment system was meant to be the last block to concretize the cypherpunk ideal of society; multiple projects tried to formulate such payment systems before Bitcoin, but it was the first successful one. It has now spread: in January 2024, the website Statista reported that there exist more than 9,000 cryptocurrencies.

Literature Review on Digital Assets and Their Regulation

The question of the digital assets regulation policy-making process has received little attention in the literature. However, many legal articles address the issue of existing regulations worldwide (Hughes 2017; Buttigieg and Efthymiopoulos 2018; Chudinovskikh and Sevryugin 2019; Wronka 2021; Bellavitis et al. 2021; Riley 2021; Novakovic 2021). Other articles, with a prescriptive focus, consider how to frame their legislation (Afzal and Asif 2019; B. Of England 2020; Nabilou 2019; Yussof and Al-Harty 2018; Shirai 2019; Yanagawa and Yamaska 2019). These articles focus mainly on central bank digital currencies, the IT security of blockchains and exchange platforms, and the cybercriminal economy (Carvalho Silva and Mira da Silva 2022). Finally, other works with varied approaches study the effects of regulations on digital assets markets (Auer and Claessens 2018; Shanaev et al. 2020; Feinstein and Werbach 2021).

Most of the above-mentioned literature is written by lawyers and economists. These articles are descriptive and prescriptive but do not entirely tackle the making of regulations as a social process. There are few works in this vein. Based on a sociological investigation of the sector, Koray Caliskan explains that digital assets are poorly regulated at the U.S. federal level because there is no specific authority for them (2022). In sociology, little work focuses *per se* on representations in policy-making (Neal 2010; Rajão 2013). However, narrative analysis abundantly nourished policy analysis since the "argumentative turn" in policy analysis in the late 1980s (Fischer and Forester 1993; Van Eeten 2007). In anthropology, the contribution of Inês Faria is remarkable because it tackles the different imaginaries involved in the making of the European legislation Markets in Crypto-Assets (2023). Here, this work focuses on the American situation with the instruments of narrative analysis in sociology.

How to Study Representations and Narratives?

The point of narrative analysis is to question the way a story is told to understand how the actors envision specific issues, and how they build a narrative to share their vision. Advocating for the use of narrative analysis in sociological studies, Franzosi lists six elements to which the researcher should pay attention: chronology, adjectives used, the structure of the narrative, values expressed in the text, and conditions of production (1998). First, chronology can be manipulated to serve an ideological bias (also valid for other dimensions such as space). Closer to the text, the adjectives emphasize some elements and minimize others. More broadly, what constitutes the background and what is put in the foreground of the narrative should be examined, as well as the structure of the story. This can help address the question of the real motive behind the narrative. Asking what morality and set of values are implied in it can also be enlightening. Finally, the question of the conditions of production of the narrative is crucial since they influence its production.

Committee hearings and transcripts

The first formal committee action on a bill might be a hearing to collect information from various actors, from members of executive branch agencies to interest groups. All hearings begin with the readings of the opening statements of the Committee's Chairman and the Ranking Member, who are then followed by statements of witnesses — generally three: members of regulatory agencies, actors from the industry, interest groups advocates, or researchers — which were previously selected by the Committee. Then opens a moment of questions where Representatives and Senators each have five minutes to address the witnesses with their interrogations.

To target the committees that had the most legislative activity around digital assets, I first listed all the bills and laws on the subject. Digital assets were mentioned in 165 bills, laws, amendments, and resolutions, treated by 19 House Committees and 9 Senate Committees. I chose to begin with the Senate Banking Committee since it is the Committee that held the most hearings, and I studied specifically four.² I chose those hearings for their spread over time and their topics but I do not plan to limit my final study to only these four: given this is a limited sample from the same Senate Committee, the visions of digital assets may not be representative of all the other House and Senate Committees.

2. S.Hrg. 113-210 "The Present and Future Impact of Virtual Currencies"; S.Hrg. 115-176, "Virtual Currencies: the Oversight Role of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and the U.S. Commodities Futures Trading Commission"; S.Hrg. 116-104, "Examining Regulatory Frameworks for Digital Currencies and Blockchain"; S.Hrg. 117-578, "Cryptocurrencies: What Are They Good For?"

How Senators View Digital Assets

The stake here is to understand how Senators address digital assets. What are their concerns? What, according to them, represents a regulatory challenge? What, in the industry, caught their attention? What should be regulated, and what should not?

One of the most recurrent questions asked by Senators is the definitional one: what type of economic object are digital assets? This question is regularly posed by Senators over the years even though the hearings were meant to address their regulation, which shows the lack of effort of this committee to seriously address the question.

The definition itself is important to regulate — the misunderstanding of the blockchain system led the Arizona state to pass an uninformed and ambiguous law in February 2017 (Walch 2017a) — but also because it is related to the question of the authority in charge of enforcement. Out of the three agencies currently in charge of enforcement, not two share the same definition of digital assets: the SEC considers them as securities; the CFTC considers them as commodities; and the IRS as properties (Caliskan 2022). Each agency regulates them inside the scope of their competencies.

The only crypto-related product over which the SEC has jurisdiction is the initial coin offerings; the CFTC can regulate derivative markets, and surveil and take enforcement action for fraud and manipulation on the underlying spot markets, but they are not entitled to set the standards on those markets.³

Neither the SEC nor the CFTC can regulate the digital assets markets. When Senator Rounds asks him if Bitcoin is a commodity, a security, or both, the then-CFTC Chairman Christopher Giancarlo offers an ambiguous answer: "One of the phrases that is often used is that Bitcoin is a medium of exchange, a store of value, or a means of account. If it is a medium of exchange, then it is a currency-like instrument. And yet, as we have seen, a number of means of exchanges have been closed to Bitcoin [. . .]. But yet it is still spoken of as perhaps a means of account. And in that case, it has implications from the Fed and currency. From our point of view, when it is used as a store of value, then it is very much like an asset, like a commodity. And, in fact, what we hear a lot of is people buying and holding."⁴

3. ICOs are a type of funding using digital tokens.

4. S.Hrg.115-176, 02/06/2018, pp.15-16.

With this answer, Chairman Giancarlo does not reply to Senator Rounds. He does not mention securities when it was part of the question, and implies that the dilemma would rather be between currency or commodity; it is *currency-like* because it can be used to buy and sell but at the same time it can be refused as a means of payment. It can be used as a store of value and then can be viewed as a commodity, but the Chairman specifies that it is "from [the CFTC's] point of view," and the volatility of digital assets is often pointed out as an obstacle to assuming a function of store of value (Figuet 2016; Lo and Wang 2014; Velde 2015; Yermack 2013). This answer shows both the pliability of digital assets, and the lack of comprehension of supervisors, as digital assets can be but are not any of these definitions (Caliskan 2022), and is unfortunate because it does not bring clarity to Senators who keep asking the definitional question in later hearings. The pliability of digital assets uses and definitions is also used to preserve the industry's interests. In the same hearing, Jerry Brito, the Executive Director of CoinCenter, managed to present them as an infrastructure ("While we may not yet have the Wikipedia or Netflix of cryptocurrency, that does not mean that we never will"⁵) and as a currency ("prodemocracy labor activity in Belarus and antipolice violence protesters in Nigeria successfully turned to the Bitcoin network to accept donations because local banks would not bank them"⁶) in his opening statement; but answering to Senator Toomey that points out that they are a systemic risk for the financial and economic system, Brito answers that "cryptocurrencies ultimately are commodities" and that "this thing could be said for any commodity, right? [. . .] You can imagine an investment in orange juice, and you can imagine a literal bug that wipes out the orange crop could have a systemic effect."⁷ The intrinsic complexity of digital assets and blockchain, doubled with crypto-actors' lexical manipulations, the constant evolution of the system with the apparition of new features, and the rebranding effectuated by exchange platforms to avoid negative associations (Walch 2017b), participate in confusing regulators around their definition, how they act and how to regulate them.

Second, Senators interrogate digital assets' potential to be used for illegal activities. The first hearings held in the Senate were gathered after the Silk Road scandal; the hearing with the SEC and CFTC Chairmen was organized after the hack of the international exchange Coincheck in 2018 for the equivalent of \$530 million; another was held by the House Financial Services Committee after the FTX collapse that involved fraud and embezzlement. In every hearing, Senators mention cryptocurrencies as potential canals for money laundering and terrorism financing

5. S.Hrg.117-578, 07/27/2021, p.7

6. S.Hrg.117-578, 07/27/2021, p.7.

7. S.Hrg.117-578, 07/27/2021, pp.17-18.

due to the pseudonymity allowed by the blockchain, but also as potential means for some countries to evade United States sanctions, like Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela.⁸

The other concerns around digital assets are whether they consist of risk for customers — customers could lose all their assets because of volatility or exchange platform hacks — and whether they represent a systemic risk for the financial system or not — surely a lesson learned from the 2008 crisis. However, very few Senators take these risks seriously. They are mostly only mentioned in arguments where the main question is *innovation*: how to build a regulation that protects customers against those risks but that above all is "comprehensive" and fosters a beneficial environment for the digital assets industry? In most cases, the protection of customers is mentioned but then set aside. The best example of this is Senator Crapo's opening statements. Senator Crapo, a Republican from Idaho, was Chairman of the committee from 2017 to 2021 which therefore gives him the prerogative of opening the hearings. The pillars of his opening statements are his presentations of blockchain as a flawless system, and of digital assets as "inevitable."⁹

From there, he assumes that "they could be beneficial" and that "the U.S should lead in their development," but that "that cannot happen without clear rules of the road." Let us decorticate this presentation. This vision of digital assets as a technology whose rise is "inevitable" is part of the representation of innovation as an ever-forwarding march, shared by both cypherpunks and transhumanists (Caccamo and Bonenfant 2021).

This conception of technology as a tool for liberating individuals from hierarchical and state structures made its way from hippie culture to Silicon Valley's startup culture (Turner 2006). In a morose economic environment at the beginning of the 1990s — declining purchasing power, low productivity, stagnation of life conditions — the Clinton administration saw that the concurrence preserved in the informatics industry fostered the U.S.' dominance over the rest of the world, and concluded that to preserve this worldwide advantage, it was necessary to preserve these markets' self-regulation. Even after the crash of the Internet bubble in the early 2000s and the 2008 crisis, this vision was still supported because innovation was seen as an engine of economic growth that relies on what Schumpeter calls "creative destruction." This vision forms what Durand calls the "Silicon Valley consensus" (2020:31). Since the beginning of the 2000s, legislators have considered that technology needs to

8. S.Hrg.115-176, p.21; S.Hrg.116-104, p.7.

9. S.Hrg.115-176, p.1 for the presentation of blockchain as a flawless system, and S.Hrg.116-104, p.2 for a depiction of digital assets as "inevitable."

be lightly regulated to protect entrepreneurship and flexibility of the market, labor, and capital. This is how an innovation first called to defy institutions in the Bitcoin white paper is not seen as threatening by Senators, but as an opportunity of which "the U.S should lead [the development]."¹⁰ Senator Crapo's representation of digital innovations as "inevitable" is therefore rooted in cypherpunk ideology but is also actually self-referential: if digital innovations are inevitable it is because Congress' position on innovative technologies has been to poorly regulate them since the beginning of the 1990s —and not because technology and innovation are inevitable *per se*.

From there, the Senators' concerns around digital assets and innovation appear more clearly: their top priorities are to ensure that the U.S. maintains its lead in technology in the international economy; and that this technology is not used against the U.S. government through money laundering or sanctions evasion. Financial crisis history appears in their concerns under the form of the mention of systemic risk and protection of customers, which leads Senators to use the term "responsible innovation," but what remains is the will to implement a "comprehensive regulatory approach" that fosters the development of blockchain technologies in the U.S to ensure their economic domination.¹¹

These representations are stable over time. Senators of this committee are not much more informed on digital assets in the 117th Congress than they were during the 113th, and their concerns remain the same even if technology evolved and raised new regulatory challenges: because ultimately, what matters for certain Senators is that regulation should foster innovation.

The Construction of Narratives

In the hearings, each intervention can be related to certain representations of the economy, technology, and its future, and carry ideological biases with them. However, some interventions are plainly in the form of *stories* where the actors in question develop narratives that anchor digital assets in specific pasts, presents, and futures.

Senator Brown: Digital assets as a Repetition of the Subprime Crisis

Sherrod Brown is a Senator from Ohio and a member of the Democratic Party. He has been a member of the Senate Banking Committee since 2015, and Chair of the

10. S.Hrg.116-104, p.2.

11. S.Hrg.116-104, p.2.

Committee since February 2021. In all the hearings he participated in, he offered incisive storytelling around digital assets. He anchors his narrative in a reminder of the 2008 financial crisis that was partly caused by financial innovation. His opening statement in the S.116-104 hearing is particularly interesting. This hearing was held two weeks after a hearing about Facebook's cryptocurrency project, Libra (abandoned since), that visibly marked the Senators since they consecrated a good amount of the hearing focusing on Libra, while the topic of the hearing was "Examining Regulatory Frameworks for Digital Currencies and Blockchain."¹² In his opening statement, Senator Brown does not mention other digital assets than Libra, and builds his intervention around the term "innovation." He argues that "big tech companies and Wall Street banks are hiding behind innovation as an excuse to take over important public services that we all benefit from and should all have a say in."¹³ He draws a parallel between the current digital assets and the derivative product that was at the roots of the 2008 crisis: "Before they blew up the economy in 2008, bankers were pitching an innovative new product called 'subprime mortgages.'" As we know, the 2008 crisis ended with thousands of families evicted from their homes and a big systemic economic crisis: he, therefore, uses the similarities between the innovation-based marketing of these two products to suggest that digital assets have the potential to provoke a crisis of similar impact.

Senator Brown also constructs the figure of a villain in his story: the "big tech companies and Wall Street banks." For him, the problem is not innovation — he explains that he is "all for innovation" and that he looks up to John Glenn, former astronaut and Senator, who "was an innovator" — but that "big tech companies and Wall Street Bankers" innovate "for profit." He therefore criticizes profit-driven innovation that threatens "public services" and "ordinary Americans" and their "hard-earned paychecks" — who are built as the victims of those greedy innovators.

Senator Brown does not suggest regulatory advice but Congress and regulatory agencies appear as the *saviors* in his statements: "If we do not move quickly to improve important infrastructure [. . .] we will end up with big corporations that have broken our trust again and again and again, and that does not make any sense."¹⁴

Jeremy Allaire: The Imagined Future of Blockchain and Digital Assets

Jeremy Allaire is the cofounder, CEO, and chairman of Circle Internet Financial

12. S.Hrg.116-71, 07/16/2019.

13. S.Hrg.116-104, p.3.

14. S.116-104, p.4.

Limited, the firm that issues the stablecoin Circle, and participated in the hearing S.116-104 on behalf of the Blockchain Association, one of the most active digital assets interest groups. In his argumentation, he overturns a lot of the criticism made around blockchain and digital assets, which are not presented as potentially fostering problems but as the *solutions to these problems*. He begins with defaults of the financial system: money laundering, privacy violations and data breaches, limited access to capital for small businesses. This allows him to introduce digital assets and blockchain as a solution: thanks to the "security, efficiency, transparency and enforceability" of blockchain that allow "much safer use of digital services and which will radically improve [. . .] privacy while more effectively thwarting financial crime."¹⁵ Using repeatedly the future tense, he depicts a world where blockchain will have brought "a series of profound changes":

Digital currencies will proliferate and become usable by billions of people on mobile devices. A new set of internet-based global capital markets built on digital assets will emerge, opening up capital markets for businesses and investors everywhere, scaling from today's thousands of companies to a world where every person and business can directly access global capital markets with the same ease that they access e-commerce market place. Blockchains will transform the global economic system.¹⁶

Here, contrarily to Senator Brown's narrative, Allaire's is anchored in the future that blockchain and digital assets would allow. He depicts an *imagined future* (Beckert 2016) where trade and business opportunities would be completely reconfigured thanks to technological innovation. However, past roots are not evicted from pro-digital assets narratives: at the beginning of this statement, the Internet is cited as a milestone to which regulators should refer to remember that tight regulation could prevent innovation from bettering everyone's lives. The arguments of the possibilities brought by technology find their roots in the cypherpunk and transhumanist imaginary of technology.

Allaire then focuses on the main obstacle that he sees to the concretization of this future: "regulatory uncertainty and the application of laws that do not contemplate digital assets [that] has led to the loss of significant opportunity." The use of the term "opportunity" tickles the Senators' concern about missing out on an opportunity to lead the markets of this innovation. Allaire then explains that this "has had a material impact on the competitiveness of U.S companies, with Asian-based companies beginning to dominate the market" and uses the example of his own company

15. S.116-104, p.5.

16. S.116-104, p.5.

that he chose to base in Bermuda that provides a "comprehensive regulatory framework for companies in the industry". The use of this example, therefore, clarifies the expression "regulatory uncertainty": Allaire suggests that digital assets companies are looking for a "comprehensive regulatory framework" that "define[s] and establish[es] digital assets as a new asset class, including appropriate rules and exemptions". Without this comprehensive regulation, he gloomily predicts that "the United States will not be the world leader in this critical new technology, it will continue to fall behind and it will not fully reap the benefits of economic transformation that digital assets will bring."

Allaire's statement can be seen as a funnel that progressively narrows. This conclusion is only allowed by the structure of the narrative that unrealistically describes blockchain as transparent and accessible. He presents these two elements as granted but they are not precisely true: the functioning of Bitcoin relies on a technocratically organized governance of core developers that gives certain developers the power to change the blockchain code (Rolland and Slim 2017). Furthermore, as the witness Professor Baradaran brilliantly explained in S.Hrg.116-104, cryptocurrency markets are not easily accessible to everyone, which disrupts the argument that cryptocurrencies favor financial inclusion. He takes the example of Nevada, the State with the largest proportion of un(der)banked, which would therefore be, theoretically, one of the largest exchange platforms' targets. However, it is impossible to buy digital assets without a bank account, and a large part of Nevadans do not have one. Therefore, comprehensive regulation is not the only necessity for the thriving of blockchain because its functioning is not what Allaire depicts. This argumentation is in line with the narratives that the Blockchain Association presents in its answers to regulatory agencies' consultations.

The themes of social justice and accessibility are present in all documents: "Crypto networks operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and are available to anyone with a phone or computer and an internet connection [. . .] While a large investment firm may be able to do off-book trades with another large counterpart, a mom-and-pop retail trader in the U.S must wait until 9:30 a.m. EST to act on her decision market."¹⁷ In all documents, digital assets and blockchain are depicted as trustless and transparent technology. Concerning the obstacles to digital assets development, the same expression can be found in some documents: "The largest obstacle that U.S crypto businesses face when competing globally is legal and regulatory uncertainty."¹⁸

17. "Request for Comment on "Ensuring Responsible Development of Digital Assets; Request for Comment," <https://theblockchainassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/BA-Treasury-RFC-final-draft-2022-08-08-2.pdf>, p.7.

Conclusion

The FTX collapse that revealed the fraud empire that Samuel Bankman-Fried had built — while being very active on the hill to help Representatives and Senators tackle the question of digital assets' regulation — shook Congress. In 2023, no less than four bills were introduced to regulate the sector. Maybe that is what it took to make them realize that the digital assets industry is not as serious as it pretends to be and that pro-crypto narratives like Allaire's dangerously threatened customers and the economy. In the hearings that I have studied, several Senators treated crypto like another financial asset while FTX did not even comply with corporate law.

Narratives like Allaire's that refer to the "Silicon Valley consensus" favor a position where Senators should flexibly regulate digital assets to maintain American technological edge but are based on misrepresentations about what blockchain technology can do. Very few witnesses bring a realistic eye on cryptocurrencies and few Senators are interested in what they are saying.

Even the main digital assets detractor in the Senate, Senator Brown, does not seriously explain the specific risks of cryptocurrencies: he merely draws a parallel between digital assets and subprime derivatives. He does not offer any guidance for regulation and has never introduced a bill on digital assets.

The complexity of cryptocurrencies results in the simplification of how they work and what they are; their similarities to already defined economic objects such as currencies, commodities, securities, and properties favor errors and manipulations. For all these reasons, the narratives built around digital assets by policymakers and the ones supposed to advise them, by inserting these objects in debates that oppose Senators more broadly — what should be the main criteria of worth between protecting citizens or maintaining American economic position — participate in distorting the policy-making process. Based on a false idea of what digital assets and blockchain are, these narratives contribute to regulatory blindness and ignorance and foster the regulatory gridlock by politically antagonizing the debate.

18. "Request for Comment on "Developing a Framework on Competitiveness of Digital Asset Technologies," <https://theblockchainassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/BA-Commerce-RFC-final-draft-22-05-07.pdf>, p.4.

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Alexandra Bucher is a student at the École Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay and an M.D student in Economic Sociology at the EHESS/PSL. Prior, she was a visiting scholar at the New School in New York City. Her research focuses on the policy-making process of digital assets in the United States and cryptocurrency trials. She holds a B.A. in Sociology from Sorbonne-Université (Paris-IV) and a B.A. in History from Université Panthéon-Sorbonne (Paris-I).

The Editorial Board



Tiffany Hamidjaja is a fourth-year Sociology PhD student at UC Berkeley, a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow, and an editor for the Berkeley Journal of Sociology. Her research focuses on children of incarcerated parents as collateral consequences of mass incarceration and the criminal justice system. Her two current projects examine: 1) the traumatic impact of viewing a parental arrest on a child in their understanding of criminality, law enforcement, and delinquency outcomes and 2) the compounding effect of parental incarceration and the child welfare system on children. Prior to Berkeley, she was a research assistant at Columbia University researching the opioid epidemic. She was also the Assistant Director of Research for the Empower Lab at NYU conducting gender violence advocacy research and was the editor of the books *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: a Complete Clinical Guide*. She holds a B.A. in Sociology of Criminology, Law, and Deviance and Psychology from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

Research Interests: Mass Incarceration, Carceral State, Law & Society, Inequality, Race and Ethnicity, Social Psychology, Life Course



Janna Huang is a PhD candidate in Sociology at UC Berkeley and an editor for the Berkeley Journal of Sociology. Her research explores the intersection of climate change, organizations, and knowledge. She is currently researching the emergence of sustainability management in organizations, and how corporations, data platforms, and regulatory bodies co-produce climate information. Janna has held fellowships and research positions at the Center for Advanced Internet Studies, the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, the Federal Communications Commission, and the American Civil Liberties Union. She holds a B.S. in Computer Science with interdisciplinary honors in Science, Technology, and Society (STS) and an M.A. in Sociology from Stanford University.

Research Interests: Technology, Climate Change, Organizations, Knowledge



Prashasti Bhatnagar Esq., M.P.H. (she/her) is a public health attorney, a Ph.D. student and Eugene V. Cota-Robles Fellow at UCLA, and a Board Director for the Midwest Immigration Bond Fund. Her work is focused on exploring and implementing community-led interventions rooted in health justice, carceral & border abolition, and liberation. Born and raised in New Delhi, India, Prashasti received her J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center; M.P.H. from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, as a Sommer Scholar, with a Certificate in Health Disparities and Health Inequalities; and B.S. in Sociology, summa cum laude from University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. She is admitted to practice law in the District of Columbia.

Research Interests: Immigration, Health Justice, Sociology of Law, Abolition



Summer Lopez Colorado is a sixth year doctoral candidate, NSF Graduate Research Fellow, educator, and artist studying in the Department of Sociology at UCLA. Their work primarily centers analyses of gendered-racialization of women of color in the U.S., examining the reproduction of overlapping forms of structural domination and strategies of resistance. Summer's dissertation project utilizes critical qualitative journey mapping to explore mobility, gender ethnic identity, and kinship-building among Latinas with bachelor's degrees. Her previous work examining disability and sex workers' experiences with the carceral system is to be featured in the book *Sex Work Today* published by NYU Press (forthcoming November 2024). In the Los Angeles community, she is an organizer and singer for Fired Up: Community Ceasefire Choir and a member of Anti-Capitalism for Artists. She holds a B.A. in sociology, cum laude from Cornell University.

Research Interests: Race, Gender, and Class, Inequality/ Mobility, Education, Disability in society



Cathy Hu is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her work sits at the intersection of punishment and society, social movements, and political sociology. Currently, she is working on an ethnographic and interview project examining criminal justice activism in the Bay Area. The project focuses on the county criminal court as a new site of intervention for social movements from across the political spectrum. Before starting at Berkeley, Cathy worked as a research analyst at the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center and received a BA in Sociology from Rice University.

Research Interests: Carceral State, Social Movements, Racial Politics, Law and Society



Jessica Law is a PhD student in Sociology at UC Berkeley. She broadly studies issues related to racial formation, the state, identity politics, and social movements. Her dissertation project explores the institutionalization of racial categories, its political consequences, and the possibilities for radical change. She holds a master's degree in sociology from UC Berkeley, and a bachelor's degree in sociology and race studies from the University of Chicago.

Research Interests: Race and Ethnicity, Politics, Knowledge



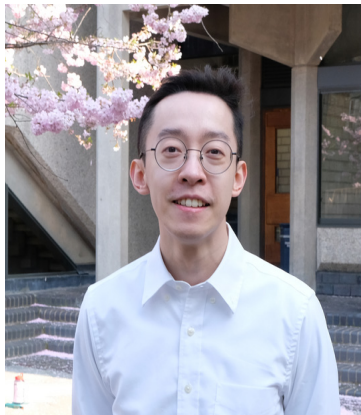
Andy Carr is a fifth-year Ph.D. student researching American law and politics at the New School for Social Research and an adjunct instructor in Fordham University's Political Science department. Previously, he was a Moscone Scholar and Dean's Research Fellow at U.C. Law, San Francisco (Hastings), where he received his JD in 2019. His research largely focuses on constitutional and administrative law, including topics like free expression under the First Amendment, democratic accountability in the bureaucracy, and public-private coordination in the housing and finance sectors. He also holds a BA in Government from Christopher Newport University and a MA in Political Science from Penn State.

Research Interests: Constitutional law, Bureaucratic decision-making, Law and Political Economy



Barbara Zagorc is a PhD Candidate in Sociology of Culture at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, and a Research Assistant at the American Slovenian Education Foundation. Her dissertation delves into the intricate power dynamics shaping contemporary urban spaces, with a particular focus on the case study of People's Park in Berkeley. Barbara's research interests span a broad spectrum, including the intersection of society and space, power dynamics within space production, public engagement in urban planning, the emergence of resistance and alternative spaces, homelessness, the criminalization of space, knowledge production and media, youth studies, and migration patterns. Her passion for urban issues developed during her life experiences and visits to the United States.

Research Interests: Urban Sociology, Social Movements, Law and Society, Knowledge Production and Media, Political Sociology



See Pok Loa is a D.Phil. Candidate in Sociology at the University of Oxford, where he is a John Swire Scholar based at St. Antony's College. He studies the cultural dimension of the transformation of work and technology. Through a cross-national comparative lens, his dissertation project studies how self-employed professionals in the high-skill platform economy understand the cultural ideals of 'work', how they confront precarity, and why these mechanisms differ by national contexts. His research site is global, covering China, Japan, and the UK. He has published research in The Sociological Review, American Behavioral Scientist, and Asian Population Studies. Prior to graduate school, he worked in tech startup companies.

Research Interests: Sociology of Work, Time and Temporality, Emotion, Science and Technology Studies, Inequality. Comparative Ethnography



Taniya Chakrabarty has recently submitted her Ph.D. dissertation titled, "Hiring as a Social Process: A Study of Campus Placements in Select Educational Institutions" in Sociology from the Centre for Study of Social Systems (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. She has previously completed her M.Phil. in Sociology from CSSS, JNU, and Masters in Globalisation and Labour from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). She has also worked as a researcher in several social science projects covering a diverse range of topics like prison labour, labour market inequality, hiring inequalities, among others.

Research Interests: Elite Sociology, Sociology of Education, Social Stratification, Sociology of Business, Public Policy



Vidyasagar Sharma is a second-year PhD student in Sociology at Bielefeld University, Germany. He is currently part of the German Research Foundation (DFG) Project "Navigating Universities: Student Aspirations, Boundaries and Transformations in India and the Philippines". He worked as a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Delhi until March 2023. He holds a master's in Political Science from the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and an M.Phil in Political Science from the Department of Political Science, University of Delhi. He has been associated as an Urban Fellow at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bengaluru, and worked as a Research Intern at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. His doctoral research focuses on studying non-traditional students' aspirations and social lives at Indian universities. Currently, he is doing ethnographic fieldwork at Delhi University, India. University.

Research Interests: Belonging, Higher Education, Social Justice, Anti-Caste Pedagogy, Spatial Identity, Urban Marginality, Ethnography



Mehdi Hoseini is a PhD student in the sociology department at Boston College. He holds an MA in sociology and currently, as a part of his PhD, is doing a project on British colonialism in Egypt. Also, he has done some work on social movements and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa. Besides the PhD program, he is a recipient of a fellowship for the 2024-2025 year at The Clough Center for the Study of Constitutional Democracy.

Research Interests: Global and Transnational Sociology, Historical Sociology, Political Sociology, Postcolonial Studies



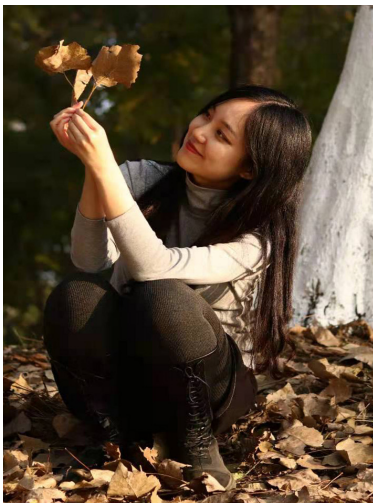
Enrique Núñez-Mussa is a Fulbright scholar and a 3rd year Ph.D. student in the Information and Media program at the School of Journalism of Michigan State University. He is an external graduate affiliate with the Center for Latinx Digital Media of Northwestern University and the Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life of UNC Chapel Hill. His research interests include journalism's epistemology, societal function, and legitimacy. Before attending Michigan State University, he was a full-time faculty member at the School of Communications of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC). He holds an MA in Journalism, Media, and Globalization at Aarhus University with a joint degree in Journalism and Media Across Cultures at Hamburg University. His BA is in Social Communication, with a Major in Journalism and a Minor in Literature from PUC.

Research Interests: Journalism Studies, Media Sociology, Field Theory, Epistemology, Mixed Methods, Historical Methods, Visual Communication



Felipe Antonio Honorato is a PhD candidate in the Social Change and Political Participation Post-Graduation Programme of the School of Arts, Sciences and Humanities of the University of São Paulo, Brazil, under the supervision of professor Valéria Barbosa de Magalhães. He was a visiting PhD researcher in the Faculty of Social Sciences of KU Leuven, Belgium, between 2023 and 2024, under the supervision of professor Katrien Pype.

Research Interests: Congolese Migrations, History of DR Congo, Belgian Colonialism, International Migrations



Xin Fan is a second-year PhD student at School of Education, Durham University in the UK. My PhD project focuses on how rural Chinese parents make school choice for their children after the small-size village schools shut down due to school consolidation policy. I am currently doing my fieldwork in rural China and enjoying spending time with and learning from my participants. Aside from writing and doing research, I love photography and a walk with my loved ones in the nature.

Research Interests: Rural Education, Educational Equity, Parenting Styles and Socioeconomic Status, Ethnography, Bordieu



Julio Montanez MA, is a second year PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Central Florida (UCF). Julio's research is located at the intersection of domestic/family/intimate partner violence, social inequalities, and public policy. His first scholarly co-authored book is entitled, *Between Systems and Violence: State-Level Policy Targeting Intimate Partner Violence in Immigrant and Refugee Lives*. His works can also be found in *Crime & Delinquency*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, *Springer Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence*, and *Violence Against Women*. One of Julio's favorite academic experiences was teaching a course entitled "Patterns of Domestic Violence in Society" at UCF in Summer 2023.

Research Interests: Domestic Violence, Social Inequalities, Law, Mixed Methods, Applied Sociology

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