

Revolutionary Mothering

Love on the Front Lines

Alexis Pauline Gumbs
China Martens
Mai'a Williams



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What I would like to achieve, regardless of the particular story poem, is the offering of respect: an offering of the view that I believe you can handle it, that there is a way and a means to creatively handle whatever may be the pain or the social predicament of your living life, and that I believe that you can and will discover or else invent that way, those means.

I want to say to children that I love you and that you are beautiful and amazing regardless whether you are—and also precisely *because you are*—Black or female or poor or small or an only child or the son of parents divorced: you are beautiful and amazing; and when you love yourself truly then you will become like a swan reborn in the grace of natural and spontaneous purpose.

And I want to say to children let us look at hunger, at famine and the world, and let us consider together, you at five years of age and me at forty-one, how we can, how we must eliminate this violence, this terror.

I want to say to children let us look at tiger lilies blooming to our own astonishment, and learn to cherish their own form and originality and freedom for our own.

And I want to say to children, tell me what you think and what you see and what you dream so that I may hope to honor you.

And I want these things for children, because I want these things for myself, and for all of us, because unless we embody these values and precepts as the governing rules of our love, and of our political commitment to survive, we will love in vain, and we will ultimately not survive.

I believe that the creative spirit is nothing less than love made manifest.

And I deeply hope that we can make love powerful because, otherwise, there will be no reason for hope.

m/other ourselves:

a Black queer feminist genealogy for radical mothering

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

The queer thing is that we were born at all.

I was born in 1982 in the middle of the first term of a president who won by demonizing “welfare queens,” in the global context of “population control,” a story that says poor women and women of color should not give birth. A story with a happy ending for capitalism: we do not exist. The queer thing is that we *were* born; our young and/or deviant and/or brown and/or broke and/or single mamas did the wrong thing. Therefore we exist: a population out of control, a story interrupted. We are the guerrilla poems written on walls, purveyors of a billion dangerous meanings of life.

And how unlikely that I would love you.

In 1983, Audre Lorde, Black, lesbian, poet, warrior, mother, interrupted the story of a heterosexist, capitalist, fashion and beauty magazine called *Essence* with a queer proposition. In an essay on the impact of internalized oppression between Black women, she offered: WE CAN LEARN TO MOTHER OURSELVES. I have designed multiple workshops with this title and I still don't know what it means.¹ Except that love is possible even in a world that teaches us to hate ourselves and the selves we see waiting in each other. Except that in a world that says that we should not be born, and that says “no” to our very beings everyday, I still wake up wanting you with a “yes” on my heart. Except that I believe in how we grow our bodies into place to live at the very sight of each

A version of this essay was published in *make/shift* magazine and dedicated to *Revolutionary Mothering* co-editor Mai'a Williams.

1 This is also the title of my dissertation, “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism.”

other. We can learn to mother ourselves. I think it means you and me.

Another generative site for the queer potential of mothering is June Jordan's 1992 essay "A New Politics of Sexuality," in which she uses bisexuality as an intervention against predictive sexuality in order to create a space for freedom. This critical use of bisexuality prefigures the use of the word "queer" to describe a politics of sexuality that is not based on a specific sexual practice, but rather a critical relationship to existing sexual and social norms. Jordan uses a proclamation of her own bisexuality as a hinge to articulate her own contradictory multiplicity: "I am Black and I am female and I am a mother and I am bisexual and I am a nationalist and I am an antinationalist."²

We say that mothering, especially the mothering of children in oppressed groups, and especially mothering to end war, to end capitalism, to end homophobia and to end patriarchy is a queer thing. And that is a good thing. That is a necessary thing. That is a crucial and dangerous thing to do. Those of us who nurture the lives of those children who are not supposed to exist, who are not supposed to grow up, who are revolutionary in their very beings are doing some of the most subversive work in the world. If we don't know it, the establishment does.

In 2005, former U.S. Secretary of Education and officer of Drug Policy, William Bennett, publicly stated that aborting every Black baby would decrease crime.³ This neo-eugenicist statement about U.S. race relations corresponds with globalized "family planning" agendas that have historically forced women in the Caribbean, Latin America, South Asia, and Africa to undergo sterilization in order to work for multinational corporations. In 1977, World Bank official Richard Rosenthal went so far as to suggest that three fourths of the women in developing nations should be sterilized to prevent economically disruptive revolutions.⁴

In the face of this genocidal attack, Black feminists from the 1970s to the 1990s appropriated motherhood as a challenge and

² June Jordan, "A New Politics of Sexuality," in *Technical Difficulties: African American Notes on the State of the Union* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 132.

³ September 28 broadcast of Salem Radio Network's Bill Bennett's *Morning in America*.

⁴ Luz Rodriguez, "Population Control in Puerto Rico," Conference presentation at Let's Talk about Sex, the SisterSong 10th Anniversary Conference, May 2006.

a refusal to the violence that these discourses of stabilization and welfare would naturalize. While the U.S. state enacted domestic and foreign policies that required, allowed and endorsed violence against the bodies of Black women and early death for Black children, Black feminists audaciously centered an entire literary movement around the invocation of this criminal act of Black maternity, demanding not only the rights of Black women to reproductive autonomy in the biological sense, but also the imperative to create narratives, theories, contexts, collectives, publications, political ideology, and more. I read the Black feminist literary production that occurred between 1970 and 1990 as the experimental creation of a rival economy and temporality in which Black women and children would be generators of an alternative destiny. A Black feminist position became articulable and necessary not only because of the lived experiences of Black mothers but also because of the successes and failures of the Black cultural nationalist movement and the white radical lesbian/feminist movement.

To answer death with utopian futurity, to rival the social reproduction of capital on a global scale with a forward-dreaming diasporic accountability is a queer thing to do. A strange thing to do. A thing that changes the family and the future forever. To name oneself "mother" in a moment where representatives of the state conscripted "Black" and "mother" into vile epithets is a queer thing. To insist on Black motherhood despite Black cultural nationalist claims to own Black women's wombs and white feminist attempts to use the maternal labor of Black women as domestic servants to buy their own freedom (and to implicitly support the use of Black women as guinea pigs in their fight to perfect the privilege of sterilization) is an almost illegible thing, an outlawed practice, a queer thing.

You are something else.

The radical potential of the word "mother" comes after the 'm.' It is the space that "other" takes in our mouths when we say it. We are something else. We know it from how fearfully institutions wield social norms and try to shut us down. We know it from how we are transforming the planet with our every messy step toward making life possible. Mamas who unlearn domination by refusing to

dominate their children, extended family and friends, community caregivers, radical childcare collectives, all of us breaking cycles of abuse by deciding what we want to replicate from the past and what we need urgently to transform, are m/othering ourselves.

Audre Lorde's essay had an older sister. In 1973, Toni Morrison wrote a novel about a dangerous, undomesticated woman, an "artist without an art form" who spurned her own mother's advice to settle down, insisting, "I don't want to make someone else. I want to make myself." *Sula*, the novel that inspired Black feminist literary critics like Barbara Smith and Mae Gwendolyn Henderson to invent Black feminist literary criticism, is a sacred text about two girls who "having long ago realized they were neither white nor male . . . went about creating something else to be." *Sula* herself is not a mother-type, except for how she creates herself, except for how she creates a context for other people to grow past the norms they knew, except for how in her name contemporary Black feminist literary theory was born and how she is how I know how to write these words.

Your mama is queer as hell.

What if mothering is about the *how* of it? In 1987, Hortense Spillers wrote "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: A New American Grammar Book," reminding her peers that motherHOOD is a status granted by patriarchy to white middle-class women, those women whose legal rights to their children are never questioned, regardless of who does the labor (the *how*) of keeping them alive. MotherING is another matter, a possible action, the name for that nurturing work, that survival dance, *worked* by enslaved women who were forced to breastfeed the children of the status mothers while having no control over whether their birth or chosen children were sold away. Mothering is a form of labor *worked* by immigrant nannies like my grandmother who mothered wealthy white kids in order to send money to Jamaica for my mother and her brothers who could not afford the privilege of her presence. Mothering is *worked* by chosen and accidental mentors who agree to support some growing unpredictable thing called future. Mothering is *worked* by house mothers in ball culture who provide spaces of self-love and expression for/as queer youth of color in the street. What would it mean for us to

take the word "mother" less as a gendered identity and more as a possible action, a technology of transformation that those people who do the most mothering labor are teaching us right now?

The queer thing is that we are still here.

We can remember how to mother ourselves if we can remember the proto-queer of color movement that radicalized the meaning of mothering. In 1979, at the National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference, where Audre Lorde gave the keynote speech, a caucus of lesbians agreed on the statement: "All children of lesbians are ours," a socialist context for mothering, where children are not individual property but rather reminders of the context through which community exists.⁵ This means that "mothering" is a queer thing. Not just when people who do not identify as heterosexual give birth to or adopt children and parent them, but all day long and everywhere when we acknowledge the creative power of transforming ourselves and the ways we relate to each other. Because we were never meant to survive and here we are creating a world full of love.

Foremother moments in radical creativity provide the precedent for radical mothering that we can find articulated clearly in Black feminist and feminist of color legacies and offer a queer intergenerational and collective vision of mothering that we can see articulated in the late 1970s and early 1980s and use to contextualize our contemporary movement to create the world we deserve together through transformative bridgeworking acts. Here are some of the moments we want to remember in this anthology.

Foremother Moments in Radical Mothering

Love is lifeforce.

*Children are the ways that the world begins again and again.
If you fasten upon that concept of their promise, you will have
trouble finding anything more awesome, and also anything*

5 Doc in "First National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference," *Off Our Backs* (November 1979): 14.

more extraordinarily exhilarating, than the opportunity or/ and obligation to nurture a child into his or her own freedom.

—June Jordan, “The Creative Spirit and Children’s Literature,” 1977

In 1977, the great Black feminist poet June Jordan was best known for her work as an author of children’s books. Her very first published book was *Who Look at Me*, based on a poem that she wrote for her son Christopher to go along with an exploration of art by and about African Americans. “New energies of darkness,” the poem says to contextualize the middle passage, “we disturbed a continent like seeds.”

June Jordan’s work as an author of children’s literature was not by default, even though she lived in a time where both Black nationalist and library driven publishing models made children’s books by Black mothers marketable. Jordan saw children’s literature as one part of a holistic intergenerational imperative. At the 1974 Howard Conference of Afro-American Writers she explained what was at stake for her as an author accountable to youth when she encouraged fellow authors of children’s literature to “write stories that correct the genocidal misinformation about reality” that she notes is being taught to children and adults through the corporate media. The basic lessons that Jordan advocates as necessary for children’s literature—that sharing is vital, that the birth of Black children is a cause for celebration and that the Blackness of Black people is wonderful—are simple and profound. These messages, which Jordan continued to offer through her children’s books and young adult fiction are direct attacks on capitalism, reproductive injustice, and white supremacy.

In a range of publications for audiences as wide-ranging as the *New York Times* Book Review section, the *Negro Digest*, and library newsletters Jordan stressed the importance of the terms of our conversations across generations about life, love, resources, and value. In “The Creative Spirit and Children’s Literature” she explains the responsibility all adults have to “make love powerful” in the face of a dominating order that seeks to put love in opposition to power. “Love is opposed to the death of the dream,” she explains and she reminds her audience of educators and authors at UC Berkeley that adults are responsible not only for “nurturing a child into his or her

own freedom” but also for responding to the questions and challenges that young people bring to the conversation as opportunities to evolve as a species.

Our definition of radical mothering builds on June Jordan’s futurism and the futurism of the Black Feminist moment out of which she spoke. In 1974, when Jordan spoke on the panel at Howard, she was sitting next to Lucille Clifton, who used her poetry and children’s literature to break silence about child sexual and physical abuse. In 1977, when she spoke at Berkeley, it was the same year that the Combahee River Collective released their groundbreaking statement that insisted that “we are ready for the lifetime of struggle and work before us.”

You can see the seeds germinating in the Parenting in/and/as Science Fiction reader and series of workshops generated at the Allied Media Conference, a gathering of visionary futuristic holistic media makers in Detroit. You can see the seeds growing in the intentionally visionary spaces crafted by the childcare collectives that designed content rich interactive tracks for children at the Critical Resistance 10th anniversary prison abolition conference, the U.S. Social Forums and the Allied Media Conference. You can see it in the ongoing work of collectives like Regeneración and Kidz City, all of which deeply inform the work in this collection.

Regeneración was founded in New York City as an organic act of love and collaboration with powerful women of color organizing collectives that emerged there. They are “committed to growing an intergenerational movement for collective liberation, in which people of all ages can participate, learn from each other, take care of each other, and dramatically reshape the conditions of their lives.” They say it explicitly in their mission statement and they walk it out through their powerful programming presence at national convergences, their day-to-day collaboration with organization in NYC and their collective visioning work. They identify “child-raising as a form of resistance,” clarifying the crucial role of childcare in the movement we need and the world we deserve.

Co-editor China Martens is a co-founder of Kidz City Baltimore, a collective founded after Regeneración and explicitly influenced and inspired by their vision for collective liberation. In their mission statement, Kidz City articulate the value of the labor of childcare as “vitaly important, and often overlooked and undervalued”

and emphasizes the importance of access to social justice spaces for children and parents. They acknowledge that our social justice movements are already intergenerational and see their work as supporting that intergenerationality so it can be “healthy and happy.”

It is an act of love to participate in the resistance work of child-raising. It is an act of love to envision and actualize an intergenerationally participatory movement. We honor and acknowledge the work of raising and caring for children as lifeforce toward the world we can only transform together.

“All Children of Lesbians Are Ours”: A Queer Challenge

“All third world lesbians share in the responsibility for the care of nurturing of the children of individual lesbians of color.”

—Doc in “First National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference,” *Off Our Backs* (1979)

By 1979, the idea of mothering poor children and children of color was under direct attack. Ronald Reagan was running for president on a platform that criminalized the “welfare queen,” a figure he invented in order to sell a neoliberal vision that insisted education, housing, and other social issues were not collective but individual issues. Eventually Reagan in the United States, like Margaret Thatcher in England, would spearhead a project of divesting from social services and loosening regulations on multi-national corporations. In the first few months of 1979, twelve Black women were murdered in Boston’s Black neighborhoods and their murders were ignored until a coalition of feminists, including the members of the Combahee River Collective, began organizing around the value of Black women’s lives and the need to end the multiple oppressions they faced. In November of 1979, the KKK opened fire in broad daylight on a rally organized by women of color and their allies demanding economic human rights in Greensboro, NC. The police arrested *victims* of what later became known as the Greensboro Massacre. That same fall, the Atlanta Child Murders began and authorities refused for months to take Black mothers seriously when they reported their children missing.

At the same historical moment, “troublesome” young people of color were in fact achieving revolutions in the Caribbean and

Latin America. The student-led New Jewel Movement in Grenada created the first Black Socialist Republic in the Americas and the student-led Sandinistas achieved revolution in Nicaragua in 1979. The question of uprising youth and criminalized mothers was directly in tension. That same year in New York the First National Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gays was a place for gay men and lesbians of color to articulate themselves as a group, distinctly from the largely nationalist groups representing people of color and the white-dominated groups representing lesbians and gays in the 1970s.

In her keynote address to open the gathering, Audre Lorde spoke directly to the responsibility of the people gathered to the next generation of youth, making it clear that they were collaborating on the future, not just with their own individual children, but with young people in general who deserved to be liberated not only from homophobia and racism, but from a violent, competitive, environmentally destructive society. In the Third World Lesbian Caucus, this collectivist stance was made even more explicit.

According to “Doc” (a mother who attended the caucus and wrote about it for *Off Our Backs*, a major lesbian periodical), as the women gathered wrote their official statement of the Third World Lesbian agenda, they explicitly thought about the labor of mothering as shared mothering and claimed responsibility for the children of all individual lesbians of color as a collective of third world lesbians. It is not clear how this particular group implemented this belief. In fact, Doc herself mentions that she prioritized going to this session but was late because of childcare concerns. Conceptually, collective responsibility for the labor of mothering and the well-being of the children in lesbian of color families has revolutionary implications. This concept came to life for Pat Parker, a Black lesbian poet in Oakland when she and her partner filled a courtroom with lesbian chosen family members in response to a legal challenge to her and her partner’s right to adopt their daughter because they would not have sufficient “family support.”⁶

Today, in a consummately neoliberal era, questions of custody have become even more nuanced. Many queer families face the reality that the state will track down sperm donors and treat them

6 Judy Grahn at the Sister Comrade gathering in honor of Parker and Audre Lorde, November 2007, at First Congregational Church in Oakland, California.

as fathers in order to avoid giving lesbian parents state assistance for raising their children, should the need arise. And there is also a precedent now for affirming lesbian and gay custody of children when it serves the state's financial interest (if it means the state will not have to provide assistance for the well-being of the children). If, as Audre Lorde wrote in *The Black Unicorn*, "our labor has become more important than our silence," when it comes to lesbian and gay custody law, money has become more important than deviance. This move by the state to affirm gay and lesbian parents with money and to violate the rights of lesbian parents without money in particular (when it comes to treating non-parent donors as parents) can be traced directly back to the criminalization of so-called welfare queens as the state divests itself from the lives of poor kids.

The fact that richer, whiter gay and lesbian parents are placed in a position to separate themselves from the wider, poorer LGBTQ population, especially the LGBTQ population of color, was anticipated in June 1979 by an interracial lesbian couple who wrote an article in a special issue of *Off Our Backs* where lesbians of color sought to address the dominating whiteness of the publication. Mary Peña and Barbara Carey wrote their critique of the conversation on lesbian motherhood, insisting that questions of race and class needed to be central to the conversation. Their call, as mothers, for a vision of lesbian mothering that was not about assimilating into existing white supremacist norms of family was instructive then and is instructive now. Their idea of parenting was not designed to get the benefits of the existing system, but rather to create something new. They celebrate the opportunity to "develop within our children the new idea that they can function without patriarchal authority." While much of the custody narrative then and now is based on patriarchal ideas that say the children are owned by (property owning) parents, they instead say emphatically:

THEY WILL NOT BELONG TO THE PATRIARCHY
THEY WILL NOT BELONG TO US EITHER
THEY WILL BELONG ONLY TO THEMSELVES.

Raising this precedent in 2016 by no means trivializes the daily struggles of queer families to support each other and to have autonomy over their lives, especially when it comes to the struggles of poor and working-class LGBTQ people to have the right to daily parent their children. However, this reminder of an earlier moment

in anti-racist queer consciousness is also crucial to how we think about the question, concept, and project of family outside of the terms set by white supremacy and patriarchy—terms under which the richest, whitest, and most assimilated might get crumbs, but the majority of our communities will always lose.

Part of the project of seeing mothering as a queer collaboration with the future has to do with transforming the parenting relationship from a property relationship to a partnership in practice. This possibility is alive in our collection and in our communities in a way that not only opens up possibilities of non-dominating relationships with our children, but which also makes visible and viable meaningful relationships between children and adults who do not have the legal or biological status of parenthood.

Black lesbian feminist Diane S. Bogus wrote about the labor of mothering without the name mother performed by many non-biological mother figures including herself as the non-mom parent of her partner's biological children. Interestingly, in 1977, on the same page of the periodical *Lesbian Tide* that covers a number of custody battles by lesbian parents, Diane S. Bogus coins the term "mom de plume," searching for a term that connects her work as a mother without the status of motherhood to her intertwined creative work as a writer. This collection follows that trajectory. The writers in this collection look at mothering as a creative practice defined not by the state, but by our evolving collective relationship to each other, our moments together and a possible future.

Toward a Motherful Future

"Not fatherless . . . How about motherful?"

—Khadijah Matin, *Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers*, 1986

The ongoing exclusion and criminalization of people of color, poor people, and LGBTQ people from the status of motherhood in relationship to the state sets the stage for creativity around the labor, energy, and existence of the practice of mothering. As Cathy Cohen points out in her 1997 article "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," the figure of the impoverished and deviant mother is a queer figure in the United States, whether that mother is part of the LGBTQ community or not. From the mid 1970s through the 1980s

in Brooklyn, New York, a group called the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers emerged through and around activist activities at Medgar Evers College with the leadership of Daphne Busby and directly took on the demonization and pathologization of Black single mothers and their children. The purpose of the Sisterhood was to provide tangible logistical support to young parents and to also reframe the practice of parenting as a single woman (and ultimately also as single men or young couples) autonomously and positively. The project consisted of a proactive youth program, Kianga House, which provided long-term housing for young mothers, logistical and legal support to help mothers and their children stay together, a mentoring program through which more experienced single mothers mentored new single mothers, and eventually a fatherhood collective for teen fathers or future fathers.

The work of the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers was affirmed and intertwined with other Black feminists at the time. The work of the collective was featured in one of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press's "freedom organizing pamphlets" as an important community model to be replicated. The dedication of a publication about this mothering work specifically by a women of color press founded by Black lesbian feminists and with a goal to address interlocking oppressions by publishing work by women of color with an emphasis on including work by lesbians is significant. The pamphlet itself, *It's a Family Affair: The Real Lives of Black Single Mothers* by Barbara Omolade, also directly links the demonization of Black single mothers to the demonization of Black lesbians within and outside the Black community and points out that this shared demonization is about the threat of women who live their lives in a way that shows that they do not need patriarchy or subservience to men.

The work of the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers is a queer work in that it reframes mothering as a collective project that foregrounds the practical and intangible needs of those whose survival is most threatened in their community. Toward this end they refuse the pathologizing language placed on female-headed families. They insist that families nurtured by women are "not fatherless . . . how about motherful?" By shifting the terms, they make a poetic move that highlights the abundance of mothering, the power of mothers and the collaboration between mothers that makes the fami-

lies least affirmed by the state dangerous, powerful and necessary. We can see the continuation of this work that centers poor and disenfranchised mothers in the work of Young Women United in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Mamas Rising in Austin, Texas, which both support mothers of color, and in particular mothers who qualify for public assistance in accessing affirming support while giving birth and at every moment in the mothering process with an analysis that connects the revolutionary work of mothering poor children of color to a collaborative embodiment of the future.

Part of the role of this collection is to make visible the connections between a queer feminist of color practice and theory around mothering, intergenerationality and the future and what we see as the most crucial and challenging work of our time, (the practice of mothering as an alternative building practice of valuing ourselves and each other and creating the world we deserve.)