

Pierce the Future for Hope:  
Mothers and Prisoners in the Post Keynesian California Landscape

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## Introduction

*Now that you have touched the women,  
you have struck a rock,  
you have dislodged a boulder,  
and you will be crushed.*

Women's Political Chant, Anti Pass-Law Movement, South Africa 1956

(A. Davis 1989: ix-x)

Under the surface of sweeping political, economic, and social changes – the sum effects of neoliberal globalization's forces and abandonments – many oppositional grassroots groups have emerged. This chapter details such a group situated in 1990s Los Angeles. The chapter's purpose is to demonstrate the inverse mirror image of globalization, and particularly to show how crises, at various scales, also present – sometimes surprising -- opportunities for organizing and action;.

Mothers Reclaiming our Children (Mothers ROC) began to organize in November of 1992 in response to a growing crisis: the intensity with which the state was locking their children of all ages into the criminal justice system.<sup>i</sup> At the outset, the ROC consisted of only a few mothers and others, women and men, led by founder and president Barbara Meredith, and life-long activist Francie Arbol. The initial project was to mobilize in defense of Meredith's son, an ex- gangster, who had been instrumental in the now-historic Los Angeles gang truce. The ROC lost his case but gained the makings of a movement. By the Spring of 1993, when the LA Four went to trial, Mothers ROC had developed a network throughout greater Los Angeles, and achieved recognition as an organization devoted to action rather than to commentary.<sup>ii</sup>

The Mothers ROC mission is “to be seen, heard, and felt in the interest of justice.” To achieve this goal, Mothers ROC convenes its activism on the dispersed stages of the criminal justice system. The group

extends an unconditional invitation to all mothers struggling on behalf of their children, and it reaches its audience in various ways. The primary method is leafleting public spaces around jails, prisons, police stations, and courthouses to announce the group's existence and purpose. When distributing flyers and business cards, members try to engage people in conversations to explain further what Mothers ROC is and does. ROCers give talks and workshops at elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, churches, clubs, and (with decreasing frequency) prisons and jails. They also appear on regional and local radio and television programs. Using these means, Mothers ROC has established a presence at many locations throughout the political geography of the penal system.

ROCers have attracted hundreds of mothers who want to fight on behalf of their own children in the system. Many were already performing in solitude the arduous labor of being on the outside for someone--trying adequately to switch among the many and sometimes conflicting roles required of caregivers, waged workers, and justice advocates. Some attend one meeting and never return, and others persist whether their person's case loses or wins. Often newcomers bring someone to the meeting for moral support--marriage or other partner, relative, child, friend from church or neighborhood, and that person also becomes active. Usually twenty-five women and men participate in each weekly gathering. Most of them learned about the ROC from one of the outreach practices noted above, or from an acquaintance who had direct contact with a member. The rest, however, were guided to the organization by their persons in custody. Among the tens of thousands awaiting trial or doing time in juvenile detention camps and centers, in county jails throughout the Southland, and in State prisons, knowledge of Mothers ROC circulates by word-of-mouth, and a standard part of the message is that the women are willing to help with even apparently hopeless cases.

The ROC's principle is printed on every flyer: "We say there's no justice. What are we going to do about it? . . . EDUCATE, ORGANIZE, EMPOWER." Mothers ROC makes no judgment about the innocence of charged persons whose families turn to the group. The group does not provide services to mothers but rather helps them learn how each part of the system works, and, as we shall see, to grasp the ways in which crisis can be viewed as an opportunity rather than a constraint. In the process of cooperative self-help, the mothers transform their reproductive labor as primary caregivers into activism; the activism

expands into the greater project to reclaim all children, regardless of race, age, residence, or alleged crime. Experienced ROCers team up with newcomers to call on investigators and attorneys. They research similar cases, and become familiar with the policies and personalities of prosecutors and judges. In addition, ROCers attend each others' hearings or trials. They also observe courtroom practices in general, and monitor individual officers of the court or state's witnesses believed to promote injustice.<sup>iii</sup> The group's periodic demonstrations outside courthouses and police stations bring public attention to unfair practices. Finally, ROCers sponsor monthly legal workshops with activist attorneys, and request research reports from scholar-activist members, to help mothers become familiar with the bewildering details of the system in action.

Never an exclusively Black organization, Mothers ROC presumed at first that it would appeal most strongly to African American women because the state seemed to concentrate its energies on taking their children. However, the sweeping character of the State's new laws, coupled with the organization's spatially extensive informational campaigns, brought Chicanas, other Latinas, and White women to Mothers ROC for help, and the group eventually came to consist of Black, Brown, Yellow, and White women, and some men. Most participants currently have persons in custody. People come to meetings from all over Los Angeles County, western San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, and northern Orange County. Their loved ones are in detention throughout California.

Mothers ROC self-consciously identifies with other Third-World activist mothers, the name deliberately invoking South African, Palestinian, and Central and South American women's struggles. As we shall see, the organization is neither spontaneous and naive, nor vanguard and dogmatic, but rather, to use Antonio Gramsci's formulation of a philosophy of praxis, "renovates and makes critical already-existing activities" of both action and analysis to build a movement (Gramsci 1971: 330-331).

### **From Military Keynesianism to PostKeynesian Militarism**

The stories I will tell about Mothers ROC are evidence of how people organize against their abandonment and disposal within oppositional spaces delimited by gender, race, class, and violence. The crisis that Mothers ROC encounters is not unique to the group or the communities they represent. Rather, the crisis

emerges from the objective conditions produced by changes in the forces, relations, and geography of capital accumulation in California. These changes, in turn, have produced surpluses of land, labor, finance capital, and state capacity (Gilmore 1998).<sup>iv</sup> Since the early 1980s, power blocs have resolved great portions of these surpluses into the state's enormous and costly prison system. In expanding and coordinating its capacities to monitor, to coerce, and to punish, the state at all levels is in process of restructuring its own form and purpose. I call this restructuring the transition from military Keynesianism to postKeynesian militarism.<sup>v</sup>

### **Gender, Power, Race, and Space**

Huge and powerful structural adjustments are not simply determinate of all social processes and outcomes. The rapid expansion of prison also derives from the political, social, and ideological operations of the U.S. racial state (Omi and Winant 1986). Racism alone does not, however, adequately explain for whom, and for what, the system works. The state's attempt to produce a geographical solution (incarceration) to political economic crisis is informed by racialized contradictions that are also gendered. These contradictions, in all of their everyday messiness, and the attempts by mother-activists to resolve them, are this paper's narrative.

The political and analytical importance of the paper coheres in three major themes that all have to do with breaking boundaries. The first theme centers on how African American practices of social mothering produce a group of diverse women working toward common goals.<sup>vi</sup> The second theme explores how outreach projects successfully permeate the organization of highly segregated social space, and in some measure start a process of socio-political reintegration. And the final theme concerns mobilizing the symbolic power of motherhood to challenge the legitimacy of the changing state. As we shall see, *Mothers Reclaiming Our Children* refuses to be bound and isolated by the normative limitations of California's gender, class, and race hierarchies. Presenting us a glimpse of utopia's work, *Mothers ROC* enacts both the possibilities and the difficulties of organizing across the many boundaries that rationalize and reinforce Apartheid America (Massey and Denton 1993; c.f. Fernandes 1997).

### **Free Gilbert Jones: The Early Political Geography of Mothers ROC**

Mothers suffer a special pain when their children are incarcerated (lost to them). It was from this pain and suffering that Mothers ROC was born! We are an organization of Mothers (and others) whose children have been arrested & incarcerated. We fight against the police abuse, the false arrests & convictions and the unfair treatment throughout the Justice System. We educate ourselves and our young about the workings of the Criminal Justice System.

#### 1995 Flyer, Mothers Reclaiming Our Children

Nobody disputes that on November 29, 1991 the Los Angeles Police Department shot George Noyes to death at the Imperial Courts public housing project, outside the homes of his mother and grandmother. The still-raging controversy concerns whether he was armed, whether he was kneeling, and whether he was begging for his life. According to members of the George Noyes Justice Committee, he was executed by a notoriously brutal policewoman. According to LAPD, he was a gangster run amok. No charges have ever been filed in the case.

The killing provoked the beginning of a grassroots realignment of power throughout South Central Los Angeles, producing along the way both the LA Gang Truce and Mothers Reclaiming Our Children. Formerly an active gang member, George had recently moved to Sacramento to get out of the life. He died while home for the Thanksgiving holidays. For his family members and friends who began organizing, the nature of George's violent end epitomized their collective experience and dread of the LAPD.<sup>vii</sup>

Two of the dead man's cousins, Gilbert and Jocelyn, and their mother Barbara, initiated the inquiry into, and institution of the means by which, those most vulnerable to state violence could begin systematically to shield themselves from it (c.f. James 1997). Family, neighbors, and visitors at Imperial Courts, including George's mother, grandmother, siblings, aunt, and cousins began to testify among themselves about what they had seen, what they had heard, and how the death could only be explained as murder. Such practice is typical wherever poor people are harrassed, hurt or killed by police (see, for examples, Piven and Cloward 1971; Hall et al. 1978). The political problem centers on what to do with the energy that fears and traumas produce. Does the state's discipline work? Does it terrorize everyone into silence, by dividing the "good" from the "bad," by intensifying anxieties that lead to premature deaths due

to alcoholism and drug addictions (including cigarettes), heart disease, suicide, crimes of passion, and other killers of the urban working and workless poor (see Greenberg and Schneider 1994).

In order to persuade as many residents as possible that the death concerned them all, the family formed the George Noyes Justice Committee. The committee started meeting at Imperial Courts in the all-purpose room, to figure out ways to fight the wrongful death. To mark the moment further, Barbara, Gilbert, and Jocelyn decided to walk the neighborhood. They started with the three South-Central public housing projects, and asked gangs to declare a one-day truce, so that all of George's family and friends--who lived scattered about the area--could attend the funeral. Los Angeles has a steady history of making and remaking itself along highly segregated lines; and material pressures and limits that did not originate with gangs keep certain kinds of people stuck in specific deindustrialized areas (Marchand 1986; Oliver et al. 1993; Soja 1989).

The dangers of the pilgrimage were many: Gilbert was a well-known gang-member who could not pass the streets freely. His sister Jocelyn, and mother Barbara, could not identify themselves as George's or Gilbert's relatives without simultaneously revealing their familial connections to, and therefore exposing themselves as, potential enemies. And finally, since neither Jocelyn nor Barbara lived in the public housing projects, residents might easily view them as outsiders making trouble in locations intensely surveilled by helicopters, on-site security, caseworkers from income assistance programs, and periodic LAPD raids (M. Davis 1990).

To reassure residents that she was not an "outside agitator" but rather a grieving aunt, fearful mother, and good sister, Barbara started holding meetings for women, especially mothers, at Imperial Courts. She explains:

I believed we had to start taking care of our children. The police would not think they could get away with shooting our children down in cold blood if we took better care of them. So I started [what eventually became] Mothers ROC at Imperial Courts. We would meet once or twice a week. We talked about grooming, about how to brush and braid your daughter's hair. How your children should look when they leave your house. How they should talk to the police, to strangers, to each other. It seemed to me it was up

to us to change things, by doing what we already knew how to do. Our mothers had taught us everything. And our grandmothers, and our aunts, and the ladies next door. They all taught us so we could have a better life. So we have to teach our children for them to have a better life. I think we let them down because we stopped teaching them and talking to them. . . .My [late] husband and I both worked, all day, every day, so our kids could have the things we never had. We thought it was the right thing to do, to work hard and to make our children's lives easier than our lives. But we didn't make their lives easier, we made them harder. And now we have to teach them, and let them teach us where we went wrong.

Born on the eve of World War II, Barbara grew up in Louisiana, enmeshed by formal and informal community networks of family and friends (c.f. hooks 1990 chs. 5-6). She married a career military man, lived on bases around the U.S. including Alaska, and eventually settled in Los Angeles where she was widowed as her four children reached adulthood. While many African Americans in Los Angeles achieved modest prosperity during the defense boom of World War II, their segregation from good jobs started at the War's end, and every subsequent recession has hit the community with lasting severity. When the old heavy industries (steel, tire, auto, and to some degree oil) cut workers or closed plants, and the waterfront delaborized, direct loss of those jobs, in combination with the disappearance of jobs reliant on that industrial core, left the city's Black working class men without access to alternative, high-wage, local, industries (Grant et al., 1996; Oliver et al. 1993; Peery 1994).

Many women from the "stranded communities" (Jones 1992) concentrated in the projects enthusiastically welcomed Barbara's meetings. They could talk about themselves, their hopes and disappointments, their interrupted life-plans. As many as sixty mothers and daughters (and sometimes young sons, but rarely any boys more than 4 or 5 years old) might attend one of the sessions, and they eagerly put themselves to the tasks of doing each others hair, and staging fashion shows, while talking about their loved ones who had died violently, who were in prison, or who had simply disappeared. According to Barbara, most of the women were engaged in the informal economy, selling legal goods or providing lawful services for unreported income (c.f. Hartmann 1981; 1996). At the same time, concern



about joblessness--their own, their children's fathers', their children's, and especially their sons'--dominated the discussions that did not focus on grooming, nutrition, or violently premature deaths. The women reported from experience what scholars prove again and again: in the United States, certain types of people have access to certain types of jobs. For Black people looking out from the jail-like complex of the Courts, the landscape of legitimate work is an expanse of big, empty factories, minimum wage service jobs in retail or home health care, unreliable, slow, and expensive public transportation, and bad schools leading, in terms of education and skills, nowhere (see also Sklar 1995).

Before Barbara had become deeply involved with the women, but after she had held an organizational meeting to propose her strategy for action, she, Jocelyn, and Gilbert achieved the one-day truce for George's funeral. As they walked and talked with people they emphasized how everyone could relate to a family who had lost a loved one to police violence. Rodney King's beating in March of that year provided a ready and politically-charged referent that even extremely hostile listeners could recognize, and it transformed highly segmented groupings into a provisional "we" who might mediate the gang-controlled divisions of Los Angeles' streets. Little by little, the older male gang members began to acknowledge their collective power, and what it could mean for Rodney King, for George Noyes, for many others, and for themselves, should they decide to allow everyone free passage through the streets of South Central for one day.

The men also agreed to a truce in the name of grieving mothers. They extended their common sense notion of gangs as "kin" and thereby recognized a central familial figure's claim on their care. "Mother" became, in name, George's mother for whom Barbara, her sister, was a stand-in. Barbara's ability to speak from her heart, to express a mother's pain at losing a child, and to acknowledge her own son's gangster status without glorification or shame, touched men for whom George's death was, at least at first, of minimal importance. On behalf of Barbara, of George's mother, of "mothers," the men agreed to redirect their power, and to instruct the gangs to police their streets and themselves in order for the dead man's family to gather for a big, peaceful, funeral.

Thus, Barbara forged an alliance among women in the projects, in spite of her own outsider status, by appealing to a power achieved through coordinated maternal practices; they made critical the activities of

mothering as necessary, social, and consequential by doing, as a group, what they already knew how to do as individuals (Collins 1990). At the same time, she, Gilbert, and Jocelyn persuaded the gangs to rearticulate South Central's divisions, and shift their everyday capacity to act as extra-legal "shadow states" by realigning their practices from small-scale "inter-state" rivalries to an area-wide alliance.<sup>viii</sup>

Both groups--mothers and gangs--quite rapidly developed a process of identification focused, at the outset, on realizing a common interest--a non-violent funeral for a man many of them did not know. But while they came together in the name of children and of mothers, their goal became actionable in the context of their more general interest to struggle against the conditions that required so much organizing to precede so homely an affair as a burial. The everyday brutality that provoked Barbara and her children to bring this particular funeral to the foreground of consciousness provided material and symbolic shape for what was to follow. The interest embodied by those who attended, or who enabled, George's peaceful services gave way to a sense of purpose not bounded by a gravesite or a day. The developing identity of purpose cast the spatially unified legal state as the legitimate object of resistance and opposition against which to organize future actions.

The next stage of organizing shortly followed George's December 9 funeral. During the services, mothers and others who spoke in his memory called for a rally to protest the police murder. At the same time the Imam of a nearby independent mosque offered his house of worship as a sanctuary where the gangsters could work to extend the truce across time and space. The gang reconciliation first embraced the rally: more than 500 people turned out at the 108th Street Station to accuse the police of murder and to announce the end of the community's passivity, vulnerability, and complicity with respect to brutal treatment too-often doled out by the hands of the law.<sup>ix</sup>

Gilbert and a number of other gang members, inspired by the turn of events, continued the peacemaking process, each day bringing in more people from a wider and wider region of South Central. Word went out through all sorts of networks alerting Black gangsters everywhere to the possibilities of the historic moment. Barbara attended every meeting at the mosque, and continued to hold the self-help discussion groups at the Courts--where sometimes women from other projects would show up to see what was going on. Gang members from the truce meetings would come to report their progress, and women

other than Barbara would also attend meetings at the mosque to monitor the proceedings. The George Noyes Justice Committee also continued to meet, with the object of finding an opening in fortress LAPD through which they could successfully lob their charges of wrongful death.

In the middle of February 1992, just as a Justice Committee fundraising dance at the Imperial Courts all-purpose room was about to end, LAPD showed up to arrest Gilbert. They charged him with taking ten dollars during an armed robbery that allegedly occurred outside the building moments earlier. The problem of justice for George immediately widened to include his cousin Gilbert. Barbara, convinced that the purpose of her son's arrest was to stop the work she and her children had started, began to organize on his behalf as well.

While Gilbert was in custody, fighting for his freedom, the Los Angeles Uprising (April 29-May 2) significantly shifted the prevailing political mood of the city. Three days of "multicultural riots" (M. Davis 1993) produced both new unities and new divisions. The uprising began in the afternoon, after a suburban jury acquitted the four LAPD officers who had beaten Rodney King. Millions had viewed the four policemen in action, because the beating, videotaped by eyewitness George Holiday, had been extensively and intensively broadcast for more than a year (Gilmore 1993; Madhubuti 1993; Gooding-Williams ed. 1993). Several weeks before the verdict became public knowledge, the peacemakers of the Los Angeles gang worlds had signed the truce. Indeed, the riots did not produce the truce; rather, the truce, Mothers Reclaiming Our Children, and the uprising were all expressions of the same conditions that characterized relations between the state and stranded Black, Brown, and other poor communities throughout deindustrializing Los Angeles.

Like the four policemen's trial, Gilbert's also changed venue. But, unlike the movement of the officers' trial to Simi Valley, where they would be more likely to have a jury of their peers (police, retired military), the state re-sited Gilbert's case from Compton--where seating a Black jury is quite easy--to the Long Beach courtroom of a notoriously "anti-gang" judge. Despite the testimony of numerous witnesses who were with him at the time of the robbery, the jury found Gilbert guilty, and, despite further testimony at the sentencing hearing by former Governor Jerry Brown, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, and others concerning the

young man's peacemaking achievements, the judge bound him over to the custody of the California Department of Corrections (CDC) to serve seven years for a ten dollar robbery.

For Barbara, the injustice in both the four policemen's and Gilbert's cases made clear that the object of struggle was not only the South East station house of the LAPD Southern Division. It was the state, at many levels, that took her son away, just as it was the state, at many levels, that enabled the police to take her nephew's life. The CDC assigned her son to Susanville, a prison located more than 500 miles from Los Angeles, near Reno, Nevada, where the White Aryan Brotherhood reputedly dominated the prisoner population. This assignment terrorized the family on two accounts: First, they feared that his notoriety as a Black gang peace activist would bring him into conflict with the Aryans. Second, Barbara had suffered a heart attack during the fall of 1992, and she was not able to make the long journey to visit him. MROC launched a successful political campaign to have Gilbert moved closer to home, and he spent about half his time in Tehachapi, about 150 miles north of home, and was released on parole after serving three years and 11 months.<sup>x</sup>

The project to "Free Gilbert Jones" also marks the beginning of the formal organization of Mothers ROC. In alliance with a number of other South Central mothers, many of whom had children in custody as a result of the uprising, Barbara started to hold regular sidewalk protests downtown, at the main Los Angeles County Courthouse, and at Parker Center--the LAPD headquarters. During this phase, in November 1992, Los Angeles activist Francie Arbol met Barbara through the intervention of an LA-based writer/activist who had been impressed both by Gilbert's accomplishments and by Barbara's eloquent persistence. Together, Francie and Barbara founded Mothers ROC.

### **From Imperial Courts to the State Courts**

The formation of Mothers ROC as a political group seeking justice coincided with the restructuring of a disbanded communist tendency that started organizing in several U.S. cities during the 1950s.. The group was renowned in radical Los Angeles circles for grassroots, issue-oriented organizing with non-party folks.

Francie Arbol joined the party as a teenager in the 1960s. She always worked on both workplace and community-based issues arising from exploitation and injustice, while raising her two daughters--mostly

alone--on a bookkeeper's wages. She brought to Mothers ROC a systematic analysis of social structures and political economy, cast in colloquial terms, and a keen sensibility for how to get things done. Unafraid to engage in spirited debate, she also carries through on any project the group decides to pursue, regardless of her opinion of it.

When Francie and Barbara sat to shape an action-oriented group of mothers, they met in the garage office of the disbanded party's ongoing umbrella organization, the Equal Rights Congress (ERC). The office is about a mile north of the infamous intersection where Reginald Denny and the LA Four had their fateful encounter, and seventy-five blocks northwest from the site of George Noyes's murder. The garage sits on property belonging to the Society of Friends, and the living room of the small front house became Mothers ROC's regular meeting place. The house has long been a location for activists to meet, a surprisingly pacific oasis in the midst of a neighborhood in constant flux. People who live in South Central, as well as those from outlying communities, are not afraid to go there because the house is not "of" any particular group's turf.

They announced a regular Wednesday evening meeting beginning in November and kept it constant. African American mothers came--six, then ten, then twenty, then twenty-five or more. They came to talk about the injustice of the LAPD case compared with that of the LA Four; they came to talk about their own children's cases; they came because there was someone, at last, to talk with about what concerned and frightened them most.

Who did not come? Most of the women who so enthusiastically participated in Barbara's mothering sessions down at Imperial Courts did not make the journey north. Mothers ROC's central premise did not change. Barbara has always been consistent in her invocation of collective mothering as the practice from which activism springs. However, the outright politics of the formal organization seems to have deterred some, especially given its dedication to confronting the state head on. This aspect seemed dangerous to people who, as noted earlier, live intensively policed lives. Francie's role discouraged others who will not trust White people as a matter of course. And finally some came and left because rumors that communists controlled the new group spread rapidly, thanks to the inadvertently strategic intervention of two Black policemen.

According to the story that circulated widely through the organization and beyond, the two policemen called on the mother of an LA Four defendant to warn her that her son's case would go much better if she disassociated herself from "those communists" in Mothers ROC. The purpose of the visit is open to dispute: some say the police were trying to break up the group, and others say they were trying to help a struggling Black woman, known personally to one of them, who did not understand the consequences of her activism.<sup>xi</sup> The news provoked a crisis in the ROC. Some women wanted Francie expelled; others, including the mother in question, quit. Barbara and Francie held special meetings one weekend at several locations in the city and county, where they fielded questions and engaged in fiery debates about communists, racism, and justice.

Francie candidly discussed her reasons for having become a communist, and also described how the party had, in her experience, outlived its usefulness. She also refused to quit the ROC, and made clear to those who planned to flee her influence that if she was the biggest problem in their lives they would not have joined the ROC in the first place. The brutality of policemen, the menace of prosecutors, and the meanness of judges with respect to their children was not a response to communism. But could the specter of communism make things worse? Barbara reminded the group that its purpose did not preclude any kind of person from joining and being active--as long as they worked toward the goal of justice for the children.

The debates followed an intricate pattern, demonstrating the rich complexities of common sense in this particular time and place (Gramsci 1971; Hall 1986). The systematic critique of state power with respect to criminalized children required the mothers also to question the authority of the state's representatives--police, judges, prosecutors and other lawyers. If communism were bracketed the mothers would agree in one voice that their problem was, indeed, state violence and systemic injustice. Yet, when confronted by the post-1989 fact of a (former) communist in their midst, many of the women absolutely embraced the state's definition of *the* collective enemy for whom Francie, a tiny Anglo activist, was a stand-in. Most of the women had attended elementary school during the cold-war buildup in the 1950s, and the lessons they learned--whether lining up for civil defense drills, or studying the geography of "the free world"--informed their current evaluation of possibility and danger. Further, the connection of communism with atheism sits ill with women for whom, as we shall see, God and prayer are vital sources of guidance and strength.

What Barbara and Francie and their allies had to do was help the women see and say that their own children—not “communists”—were “the enemy” now (Gilmore 1993). Even if the policemen represented authentic African American anti-communist fears, rather than the designs of the county prosecutor, the outcome would not change. The ROC’s children already labored under the greatest liability—that of having been designated “human sacrifice” (Brown 1992) in the ongoing drama of a state struggling and restructuring in the context of its own delegitimation at the “end of history”. Others versed in radical traditions spoke up during the agonizing debates, but the heat stayed mainly on Francie, who stalwartly took it. Francie was not the only Anglo in the group at the time, but the combination of her whiteness, her radical roots, and her refusal to yield—plus her blunt confrontational style—kept her downstage center during the crisis.

The crisis resolved into a truce among those who stayed, forcing the group to mature quickly into an organization *for* itself despite substantial internal differences. The process heightened suspicions but also enhanced everybody’s sense of political identity. That is, while disagreeing with the “politics” figured by Francie and others, the women enacted an alternative political vision by remaining in the fight *as* the ROC. They made clear to all who inquired that *mothers*, not some hidden cadre of White or Black communists, openly and deliberately set the agendas for action. Severance of the ROC from the ERC gave symbolic emphasis to the organization’s insistence on autonomy, even though the meeting place, office, and telephone number did not change.

In this period, the group’s actions, formerly centered on the Gilbert Jones and the LA Four cases, became generalized so that the ROC could act quickly and consistently on new cases. The ROC set up the systems of court monitorin and intitated the legal workshops. The workshops became primary centers for people to learn about topics such as self-representation, sentence enhancement, and related issues. One crucial item emerged consistently in the workshops: the assumption that a private attorney is preferable to a public defender. Such thought is rooted in U.S. common sense assumptions that “you get what you pay for”. The fact that working people including the mothers “pay” for all the public defenders via taxation is invisible in this schema. However, in the ROC, automatic distrust of public defenders has gradually given

way to a view of how sectoral growth in industrialized punishment produces both overworked public defenders, and a concomitant expansion of unscrupulous private lawyers looking to make a sure dollar.<sup>xii</sup>

The shift in membership -- from the proto formation at Imperial Courts to the fully-fledged Mothers ROC poised to do battle in the state courts --represented a change in the social position of the women as a group. Nearly all current ROCers perform waged work in the formal economy, and if they do not it is because they are disabled (generally by ailments of poverty and stress such as heart disease and cancer) or they are retired. Many are homeowners who live in modest stucco or frame bungalows, or condominiums. They are keenly conscious that they have *something* to lose (Sivanandan 1982). The structure of Mothers ROC gives them a framework for hope as well as for action -- thus purpose-- and it provides the basis for an expansion of their attention from seeking remedies in the courtroom (law) to exposing and changing the ways the system operates (politics).

### **One State + Two Laws = Three Strikes**

[W]hen the woes of the poor press most dangerously upon the rich, then an age searches most energetically to pierce the future for hope.

Peter Linebaugh (1992: 65)

Every Mothers ROC meeting is framed by prayer. At the beginning and end of each session the group holds hands in a circle and asks for protection and guidance. The women who lead the prayers have a gift for preaching. Their invocations set and summarize the seemingly endless agenda of reclaiming the children, within a material context of spiritual hope realized through human action. Prayer helps span the visible and invisible social distances among ROCers for whom, in most cases, organized religion is a vital aspect of life. Prayer also demonstrates the power of attentive listening for group-building. Anyone in the group may comment affirmatively on the leader's devotional trajectory, and such encouragement of the speaker encourages the collectivity. And finally, by emphasizing the difficulty and urgency of the situation that has brought them together, prayer renews and strengthens the mothers' provisional unity. Individual



differences, which occasionally produce incidents, need not become persistent organizational impediments--in a church or in the ROC.

The group meditation on power and powerlessness establishes the scene in which mothers are able to identify with each other. Arrest and incarceration are common in the U.S., yet those who are touched by law enforcement are so segregated in many different ways that the experience of confrontation with the legal system does not produce collective oppositional activities. In the ROC and elsewhere, the similarity of mothers' stories can produce a sense of commonality, but there are no guarantees that such a sensibility will serve as the basis for collective action. Within a social order of wide and deep inequality-- most forcefully recognized as racial inequality--mothers are cautious because they know not all children are equally vulnerable to the law's harsh punishments.

When Pearl Daye's thirty-one year-old son called from the police station to say he had been arrested for allegedly shoplifting a package of razor blades from a discount drugstore, she was confused--he had a steady job--and distressed--he had not been in any kind of trouble for more than eight years. Going to the station to post bail, Pearl found it set at an absolutely unattainable \$650,000 because the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office charged Harry Daye with a third-strike felony rather than a petty theft misdemeanor. Suddenly, then, the African American man who seemed successfully to have put his life in order faced a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years to life without possibility of parole.

As Pearl related the compounding events of Harry's arrest and accusation at her first Mothers ROC meeting, she often paused because of the almost unendurable anxiety of retelling and revealing seemingly unbelievable adverse family circumstances to strangers. However, the roomful of women recognized the Daye's drama as neither bureaucratic error nor bad dream, but rather as an increasingly ordinary conflict between families like theirs and the law. The plot had already become so familiar, one year into implementation of California's Three Strikes Act, that at certain moments a number of women, as though they were a chorus, recited with Pearl what the Public Defender and others had told her--especially the (street name of the) guaranteed sentence: "Twenty-five to . . . without."

Harry Daye faced the death of freedom because at that time the Los Angeles County District Attorney's written policy was to enforce the Three Strikes law vigorously. Such vigor includes charging

defendants to ensure the longest possible prison sentences, regardless of the current character of the defendant's life. Harry's alleged petty theft constituted what California law designates a "wobbler"--an offense that can be classified, and punished, as either a misdemeanor or a felony. Three strikes and other minimum mandatory-sentence laws, conventionally portrayed to work with a machine-like disregard for individual circumstance, actually explicitly allow prosecutors and judges to use discretion "in the interest of justice." However, throughout California--especially in the southern counties where most prisoners are produced--the practice of prosecutorial or judicial discretion in favor of second or third "strike" defendants is so rare as to be newsworthy (c.f. Gorman 1996).

Pearl ended her introductory testimony to Mothers ROC with an observation about the entire system: "The way I see it there are two laws, one for the Black, and one for the White." Leticia Gonzales, a Chicana whose husband had started a "twenty-five to . . . without" sentence some months earlier disagreed. "No. I think there is one law for the People of Color, and another law for the White." By this time, everyone was talking. Francie Arbol proposed another structure: "Poor people, and rich people." But poor versus rich failed to explain the State versus O.J. Simpson: Why was the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office spending so much time and money to convict one Black defendant?<sup>xiii</sup> Therefore, the distinction could not be rich versus poor. At the same time, because virtually all the prisoners anyone in the room knew or could imagine were people of modest means from working-class families, the money question could not simply be dropped. Anti-Black racism seemed to explain a great deal, but could not account for all extreme vulnerability before the law.

In the year or so before Pearl Daye brought her case to the ROC, Latino (mostly Chicano and Mexican) prisoners surpassed African Americans as the largest group, in absolute numbers, in CDC custody.<sup>xiv</sup> The unevenness in outcome for People of Color lies in the offense with which defendants are charged. Both federal and California laws allow radically different treatment of people who have done essentially the same thing. Such police, prosecutorial, and judicial prerogative--which, since its introduction in the early 1980s, has remained fundamentally impervious to challenges based on "equal protection", "cruel and unusual punishment" and other constitutional principles--provides both the means

and the encouragement for application of substantively different rules and punishments to various kinds of defendants (c.f. Butler 1995).

It is not surprising, then, that the ROCers had a hard time developing a brief characterization of how the law discriminates. The law's ability to wobble makes routinely unequal punishments possible. At the same time, the wobble makes developing a common-sense definition of how such inequality is achieved and reproduced on a case-by-case basis very difficult indeed. Everyone who spoke--nearly everyone in the room--had no doubt that the system operates on a dual track. But how is each defendant routed?

Leticia Gonzales could match Pearl's story horror for horror. Her husband had been tried and convicted for shoplifting a pair of pants during the Christmas shopping rush. She is convinced that either nobody took anything, or that somebody else, who looks like her husband, took the things. "Why would he take some pants? He could buy them. And at Christmas, there are guards everywhere around at the stores. He's not stupid." However, since in his deep past he had been convicted on two counts of robbery, the petty theft of a pair of inexpensive trousers became, in his case, robbery, sending him down for "twenty-five to . . . without".

Leticia heard about the ROC from her husband who heard in the county jail. She was afraid to come to the meeting at first, because she did not know anybody, lived down in San Pedro, and was afraid she might not be welcomed. Much to her surprise, the group, still composed predominately of African Americans, did welcome her, and as the months went by, more and more Latinas showed up at the door. Mothers of sixteen year olds charged with murder. Wives of second and third-strike defendants. Grandmothers of kids charged under the STEP Act. Indeed, the Black and Brown cadres of *abuelas* began to hold occasional caucuses--after the manner of the grandmothers of Argentina's *Plaza de Mayo*--to discuss their unique problems, which often centered on their status as undocumented primary caregivers to their children's children.

The number of Latinas attending meetings increased, as the Los Angeles County prosecutor extended vigorous enforcement of California's rapidly expanding body of criminal legislation to Brown as well as Black defendants. The night of Pearl Daye's first visit, the ROC's debate about the law's unequal application continued well into the evening, and spilled out onto the sidewalk after the regular meeting came to a close. The crucial issue in resolving the question had to do with maintaining organizational

solidarity. Finally one of the women proposed this solution: There are, as Pearl had said, two laws--one for Black people and one for White people. Given how the prosecutors had started charging more and more Brown, and other poor defendants, under the new laws, especially Three Strikes, then perhaps the explanation could be put this way: You have to be White to be prosecuted under White law, but you do not have to be Black to be prosecuted under Black law. The resolution satisfied that evening's debaters, as it provided a way to recognize the extension of prosecutorial practices without displacing the African Americans' measurable experience of the most intensive application of the laws.

## **Situating Mothers ROC: Some Strategic Historical Comparisons**

We think organizations have to be the first step toward a social movement.

Myles Horton, founder, Highlander Center (Horton and Freire 1990: 124)

Mothers Reclaiming Our Children is part of a rich history of oppositional struggle, and may be compared with several kinds of twentieth-century movements whose systems, organizations, and or practices resonate with the Los Angeles grassroots women's understanding of social conditions and approach to social change. As with Mothers ROC, the organizations briefly examined in this section mingle reformist and radical ideologies and strategies; in the vision and substance of their political projects, they pose challenges to the oppressive system in question and to dominant structures of antisystemic organizing. I believe such complexity expresses an organic relation between these struggles and the specific context of the crises from which they emerge. Here, I differentiate specificity from a narrow conception of localism (Gramsci 1971; Massey 1994). The way conflict emerges in a social structure is not inevitable, even though it may be understood, at a higher level of abstraction, to be an expression of a fundamental antagonism--such as class conflict. What happens at the local level has everything to do with forces operating at other scales. Thus, in the following discussion I wish to draw out the ways in which practical questions of method, argument, and/or structure powerfully engage crisis on the material and ideological stages where the conditions of crises unfold.

For Mothers ROC, then, three major conditions of existence--and categories of analysis--form the heart of the group's specific response to crisis. These consist of the embeddedness of African American and other working-class mothers in a world only minimally circumscribed by home; the problem of organizing the unorganized in the U.S. according to strategies other than singular, insular identities (e.g., occupation, race, parental status); and the potential power of "motherhood" as a political foundation from which to confront an increasingly hostile state.

Women whose paid labor is crucial to the household economy, and who are normatively measured, in the dominant discourse and the gross domestic product, according to their performance in the gender-

segmented labor market, embody different roles with respect to production, reproduction and politics than women who evade such material and ideological constraints (Boris 1989). Such difference in the United States is further structured by race (Fields 1990). During the Progressive Era, African American “club” women who organized around issues of gender and work could not echo, on behalf of their sisters, the rhetoric of home and dependency espoused by White women reformers (L. Gordon 1994; Boris 1989; Giddings 1984). While immigrant European working class women ordinarily had to engage in waged labor, the standards by which White feminist/gender politics--dominated by native elites--strove to produce the “True” and then the “American” woman rested on the expectation that all such women should, at the earliest economic opportunity, become dependent, full-time homemakers (Boris 1989; Carby 1987; Gordon 1994). The gendered economic power of anti-Black racism made such an expectation for African American women impossible, since there was no likelihood either that their own paid labor would soon become redundant or that the males in their households could ever gain a reliable family wage (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Fortunati 1995; Wilson 1987).

African American club activists’ politics focused on ways to ameliorate working class women’s daily experiences within and between home and work, with the church typically serving as a semi-public arena where such women could gather in relative safety to organize for social change ( Giddings 1984; Gilkes 1979, 1989; Long 1986; G. Gilmore 1996). Efforts centered on life’s everyday details, and included lessons in such areas as grooming, literacy, and better housekeeping for wage or for family. Club women used recognizable household relations to build women’s political consciousness. The self-help lessons constituted strategies through which the most vulnerable members of the workforce could make themselves stronger against everyday assaults on their integrity--assaults typified by employer rape no less than paltry wages (A. Davis 1981). Activists insisted that Black women must expect to act on a stage where no sturdy legal or customary curtain shielded the private from the public realm. The legacy of slavery, the reality of Jim Crow laws, and the discipline of lynching suspended any illusion that Black women might either withdraw from the labor market--and the coercive social controls determining when and where they enter it--or turn to the state for protection or relief (A. Davis 1981; Jones 1985; Giddings 1984; Ginzburg 1988; Sterling 1984; White 1985).

In this historical context, motherhood functioned through, and as an attribute of, the woman-as-laborer, enacted as collective, or social, rather than individualized practice (Collins 1990; see also White 1985, Kaplan 1982). Club women included mothering lessons among their outreach projects because they rightly viewed the collective future of the race to depend on the children's successful preparation to participate in severely restricted, highly unstable job markets. In other words, the club women's specific conception of the politics of motherhood required good housekeeping to include, as a matter of course, deliberately raising children to survive in racially defined, conflict-riven lives. These lives would be shaped by a constantly "changing same" (Jones 1966) of negative contingencies--exemplified by the nation's territory-wide, multi-scalar accumulation of both Jim Crow laws and *de facto* segregation practices in the early twentieth century (Harper 1892; DuBois 1992 [1935]; Marks 1989; Woods 1996). Most children might learn strictly to labor in whatever niche constituted their generation's labor market enclave (Willis 1977). At the same time, however, the constant restructuring of labor markets--most notably during wartime--meant that mothers were also educating their daughters and sons in ways of thinking that might lead to more radical consciousness of what change *without* progress meant, given the material and ideological positioning of Black people in the racial state (Woods 1996; Lipsitz 1987; Himes 1945, 1971; Omi and Winant 1986) .

While it may appear that the type of organizing club women espoused fell simply and squarely into Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee model of cooperative apartheid, it also opened new possibilities for women to enlarge their scope of activity through emphasizing rather than minimizing Black women's visibility in the world. Although dangerous, visibility also provided Black women with peculiarly exploitable access to potentially activist audiences because of their regular passage through public space. For example, women were often in the vanguard protesting state and state-sanctioned terrorism--in part because men were the ordinary victims of lynching and police brutality (Carby 1987; Ware 1992). Similarly, the Montgomery Bus Boycott--popularly viewed as a founding moment of the post World War II civil rights movement--gained structure and strength from a church-based organization of women who built the scaffolding from which to dismantle U.S. *de jure* apartheid around the issue of public transportation for African American domestic and other workers (Powledge 1991; Kelley 1994). For both the immediate

Montgomery audience, and for viewers of newsreels shown on televisions and in movie theaters across the United States, the boycott produced an unfamiliar and compelling image of urban Black women walking in groups to and from the job, their apparent cheerfulness belying the fearful conditions in which they confronted the most readily perceivable ways in which U.S. racism divides class and gender. In these women, foes recognized unanticipated adversaries; allies, by contrast, recognized, through the women's actions, how familiar *practices* of everyday life might be rearranged in order to take on previously unimaginable tasks (Morris 1984).

Organizing is always constrained by recognition: How do people come actively to identify in and act through a group such that its collective end surpasses reification of characteristics (e.g., identity politics), or protection of a fixed set of interests (e.g., corporatist politics), and instead extends toward an evolving, purposeful social movement (e.g., class politics) (Zoleta-Nantes 1995; Gramsci 1971; Hall 1986, 1990)? This question has particular importance when it comes to the age-old puzzle of organizing unorganized U.S. workers, especially when the fundamental criterion for identification is not limited by a worksite or occupational category. U.S. labor history is dominated by worksite- and occupational-movement-building, with group boundaries established by employers or by skills. These boundaries, of course, negatively organize--and even dis-organize--the excluded, because U.S. worksites and occupations are historically segregated by both gender and race (Cobble 1991, 1994; Johnston 1994; Milkman 1987; Roediger 1991; Wial 1993; Woods 1996).

In a few instances U.S. labor activists have broadened their practices by engaging in a class rather than corporatist approach. Whereas most such efforts resulted in failure--crushed by the capitalist state's coercive and ideological apparatuses--some attempts along this way produced surprising results (Dubofsky 1969; P. Foner 1970; Wial 1993). When the Communist Party attempted to organize workers in the relatively new steel district of Birmingham Alabama during the 1930s, it ran into a sturdy wall of racism that prevented the CPUSA from forging a movement in which Whites could recognize themselves and Black people as equally exploited workers rather than as properly unequal Americans. However, the organizers who traveled the urban mills and rural mines seeking out industrial laborers discovered an unanticipated audience for their arguments among predominately Black sharecroppers. The Share Croppers



Union adapted the CP analysis to their own precarious conditions, and the group grew rapidly, forming a network of cells in urban and rural locations throughout the region. One needed neither to be a sharecropper, nor employed, nor Black to participate in the union. Upwards of 6000 millworkers and miners, in addition to dispossessed farmers (busy or idled), found common cause in a social movement through their understanding of their collective “equality”--which was at that time their individual interchangeability and disposability on northern Alabama’s agricultural and industrial production platforms.<sup>xv</sup> State forces eventually crushed the movement, yet the submerged remnants of the union, according to its indigenous leadership, formed the already-existing regional foundation for intra-wartime organizing and postwar anti-racist activism (James 1980; Kelley 1990; Painter 1979; Wilson 2000).

Currently, Justice for Janitors (JfJ) is an innovative labor campaign in which neither worksite nor occupation provides a sufficient organizational base in the low-wage service industry. Learning from history, JfJ’s strategy is to exploit the otherwise inhibiting features of the labor market by pursuing a “geographical” approach to organization (Wial 1993; Johnston 1994). In the massive layoffs of the late 1970s and early 1980s, firms broke janitorial unions which African Americans and others had painstakingly built under the aegis of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during and after World War II (James 1980). Industry subcontracted maintenance, and thereby negated labor’s hard-won worksite-by-worksite agreements.

The ensuing proliferation of small, easily reorganized janitorial service contractors has made actual employers moving targets and thus rendered traditional forms of wage bargaining impossible to carry out and enforce.<sup>xvi</sup> Further, janitors working under the new arrangements, often at less than minimum wage, are not the same people who fought wages up to \$10.00 or more per hour by 1980.<sup>xvii</sup> Thus, in addition to pressing employers for contracts, JfJ’s solution is to organize both the actual market for janitorial services *and* the potential labor market for janitors. This areal approach limits employers’ flexibility, because it is their actual and potential *clients* who agree to do business only with unionized contractors. The solution also requires that labor organizing be community organizing as well, as was the case with the CPUSA’s work in 1930s greater-Birmingham. To appeal to former janitors in target areas, and to potential janitors wherever they may be, JfJ proposes a bottom-up strategy to develop comprehensive regional plans that

include, but are not reducible to, setting minimal standards for wages that employed individuals (janitors or not) can expect to pull down (Wial 1993; Parker and Rodgers 1995; see also Faue 1990; Woods 1996).<sup>xviii</sup>

The divisions between home and work, private and public, on the stage of capitalist culture constitute for many the normative limits to particular kinds of conflict. When the political dimensions of breaches in those limits become apparent in crises, new possibilities for social movements unfold. As we have seen, Black working-class women politicized the material and ideological distance between their paid and unwaged labor by traversing the streets. More recently, janitors around the U.S. have taken their clandestine exploitation public on a number of fronts, combining community-based organizing with front-line, public sphere militancy led by immigrants who gained experience as oppositional subjects of, for example, Salvadoran state terrorism (Pulido 1996).

In Argentina, under the fascist military government (1977-1983) the *Madres* of the *Plaza de Mayo* defied the expectation that women should not meddle in affairs of the state--which is to say the male, or public sphere--by organizing on the basis of a simple and culturally indisputable claim that mothers ought to know where their children are. The fascists' nightly raids to kidnap teenage and adult children, most of whom were never seen again, effectively coerced neighbors who had not yet been touched to avert their eyes and keep their mouths closed. However, a cadre of mothers, who first encountered each other in the interstices of the terrorist state-- waiting rooms, courtrooms, and the information desks of jails and detention centers--eventually took their quest into the *Plaza de Mayo*. There, with the eyes of the nation and eventually the world on them, they demanded both the return of their disappeared and the identification and punishment of those who had perpetrated the terror. The mothers dressed for recognition, wearing head scarves made of diapers on which each had written or embroidered the name(s) of her disappeared (Anderson 1993; Bouvard 1994; Femenía 1987; Fisher 1989; Mellibovsky 1997; Sepúlveda 1996).

The *Madres'* fundamental position, echoing and echoed by similar movements in such places as South Africa, Palestine, and El Salvador was, and is, that children are not alienable (Harlow 1992; Tula 1994). In order to make this position politically material, in the face of continuous terror, the *Madres* permanently drew back the curtain between private and public, making "maternal" activism on behalf of children a daily job conducted as openly and methodically as possible. The *Madres'* persistence, both before and after the

official admission that the children had died horribly, transformed the passion of individual grief into the politics of collective opposition. Betrayed in the early years by state and church officials alike, by military, police, bureaucrats, and priests, the *Madres* learned to suspect institutions as well as individuals, and, as their analysis became enriched by experience, they situated their disappeared in the context of political economic crisis. Thus, when a re-democratized Argentina emerged, they did not return to hearth and home but rather expanded their political horizons. Currently, their politics focus on the effects of the country's structural adjustment program which has widened and deepened poverty and reduced opportunities for young people (Fisher 1989; Sims 1996).

As we have seen, Mothers ROC does its work in a political economic climate as hostile, and often as deathly, as that which formed each group we have briefly examined. The ROC's solutions to the problems constituting the daily struggle to reclaim the children draw from the structural features of radical self-help, from the strategies of organizing on every platform where conflict is enacted, and from the argument that mothers should extend their techniques as mothers beyond the veil of traditional domestic spheres. In a word, they enact the "consciencization" of motherhood (Freire 1970). The solutions are grounded in, but not bounded by, local conditions. Indeed, the organicism of Mothers ROC has to do precisely with its attention to the specific sites and scales of power that produce prison geographies, *and* to the ways those sites and scales might be exploited for oppositional ends.

### **Conclusion: From the crisis of place to the politics of space**

A small, poor, multiracial group of working-class people, mostly prisoners' mothers, mobilize in the interstices of the politically abandoned, heavily policed, declining welfare state. They come forward, in the first instance, because they will not let their children go. They stay forward, in the spaces created by intensified imprisonment of their loved ones, because they encounter many mothers and others in the same locations eager to join in the reclamation project. And they push further, because from those breaches they can see, and try to occupy, positions from which to challenge collectively the individualized involuntary migration of urban "surplus population" into rural prisons (O'Connor 1973).

“Arrest is the political art of individualizing disorder” (Feldman 1991: 109). Such individualization produces again and again, for the millions arrested in the U.S. each year, fragmentation rather than connection as each person and household, dealing with each arrest, must figure out how to undo the detention--which appears to be nothing more than a highly rationalized confrontation between the individual and the state. The larger disorder is then reified in typologies of wrongdoing such as gang activity; alternatively, the larger disorder is mystified as “crime” which, like unemployment, is alleged to have a “natural” if changing rate in a social formation (see, for examples, Greenwood 1994; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985). ROCers gradually but decisively refuse both the individualized nature of their persons’ arrests, and the “naturalness” of crime, of poverty, of the power of the state (see also Anderson 1995; Derber 1996; Stabile 1996). They arrive at their critique through action. Action, crucially, includes the difficult work of identification--which entails production, not mere discovery, of a “suture or positioning” (Hall 1990; see also Jackson 1991). Through the socially and spatially complex processes of identification that are attentive to racial, class and gender specificities as well as commonalities, the ROCers transform themselves and the external world.

By enlivening African American practices of social mothering, the ROCers engage a broadening community in their concern for the circumstances and fate of prisoners. That social opening provides avenues for all kinds of mothers (and others) to join in the work, as the enormous labor confronting each mother tends to encourage all both to accept and extend help. I make no claim for “social mothering” as an exclusively or universally African American cultural practice; it is neither. However, Barbara Meredith’s common sense invocation of mothering as collective action makes possible the group’s integration of mothers with similar or quite different maternalist assumptions (Kaplan 1982; see also Traugott 1995). In other words, techniques developed over generations, on behalf of Black children and families within terror-demarcated, racially defined enclaves, provide contemporary means to choreograph interracial political solidarity among all kinds of “mothers” losing their loved ones into the prison system. These mothers and others can and do identify each other in the small “public” spaces between their socially segregated residential living places and the “unitized” carceral quarters in which their children are caged. Some

members are shy about jumping into the process, and others come to the ROC for help on their individual case only; but all who persist practice the “each one teach one” approach.<sup>xix</sup>

The process of integrating different kinds of mothers and others into the ROC involves extensive outreach designed to permeate social boundaries. These projects catch people in the “betweens” of segregated lives: at work, for example, or on the bus. Such areal permeation, similar to (and literally overlapping) the Justice for Janitors Los Angeles crusade, raises a more general problem of identification. The ROCers easily recognize each other in the spaces of the criminal justice system. Outside those areas, what constitutes resemblance? If we are not all Black, and if all activists are not Mothers, and if all prisoners are not (young) children, then who are we? Poor people who work. As a community of purpose, Mothers ROC acts on the basis of a simple inversion: We are not poor because our loved ones are in prison; rather, our loved ones are in prison because we are poor. It follows that outreach should target working poor people and their youth. Class, then, constitutes the context for this analysis and action, but cannot displace or subsume experiential issues of race: poor people of color have the most persons in prison (see also Hall 1980).

Nor does gender disappear, on two accounts; first, women who work to support their families and to free their loved ones encounter each other as laborers with similar triple work-days--job, home, justice. In addition, mothers who reject the disposal of their children, and ask why they themselves should not be compensated for struggling against the state, raise a challenge to both their children’s and their own devaluations from the vantage of reproductive labor (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Fortunati 1995; Quick 1992).<sup>xx</sup> The communist organizational and analytical influences in the ROC help keep these overdetermined antagonisms in the foreground of activism. As a result, Mothers ROC is building an alliance that women and men may enter from a number of positions, and where they stay because the group’s primary purpose retains clarity--even as members repeatedly clash when trying to produce an adequately comprehensive account of the world in which they struggle. In the context of shared antagonism, the activists produce the values they share; in turn, that collective work produces community solidarity, or political integration, enabling further action. Solidarity increases with increased knowledge concerning the complexity with which the state, and its allies, conducts the imprisoning project.

The alliance tends toward a scale of resolution at which, for example, any individual police precinct house ceases to be the total presence of the state, and shrinks back toward its systemic position--the neighborhood outpost of what the ROCers characterize as a military occupation that will require a political movement to dismantle it.<sup>xxi</sup> As Mothers ROC seeks a wider regional membership, it also seeks to locate itself in a wider community of activism, reaching out nationally and internationally.<sup>xxii</sup> Such movement heightens the potential for connections between Mothers ROC and women throughout the global workforce who struggle daily against the actual processes and effects of worldwide structural adjustments.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The ineluctable salience of gender structures the means through which Mothers ROC critically deploys the ideological power of motherhood to challenge the legitimacy of the changing state. All prisoners are somebody's children, and children are not alienable (see Cornell 1995). The racial and gendered social division of labor requires mothers of prisoners to live lives of high visibility; ROCers turn that visibility to a politically charged presence, voice, and movement against injustice, such that their activism becomes the centerpiece of their reproductive--and socially productive--labor (see Fisher 1989). As with mothers' movements in Latin America, South Africa, and Palestine, Mothers ROC's front-line relation to the state is not as a petitioner for a share in the social wage, but rather as an antagonist against the state's form and purpose with respect to the life chances of their family members and those like them. The insistence on the rights of mothers to children, and children to mothers, is not a defense of "traditional" domesticity as a separate sphere; rather it represents political activation around rising awareness of the ways that the working-class "domestic" is a site saturated by the racial state.

In sum, the South African women's political chant from which Mothers ROC derives its name presents a succinct image of contradiction in action: From woman, to rock, to boulder, the singers predict their resolute consolidation into a force set in motion ("You have dislodged a boulder") by the very power they must crush.

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<sup>i</sup>A note on terms: When “State” is capitalized, it refers to California; in lower case, “state” refers to the political-geographic category, which I will discuss at a number of levels: U.S. federal, California, Los Angeles County, Los Angeles City, and so forth. The state is not a monolith; the conflicts, coordinations, and compromises within and between various scales of the state are the subject of a different segment of this project. However, I do wish to underscore here that readers who find structural analysis debilitating might (ironically) find reassurance in the indisputable fact that “agency” figures in state practices just as in grassroots movements. The power bloc in Sacramento who have mustered great political and ideological energies on behalf of constructing the country’s biggest prison system are not “the state”, but by seizing and developing this area of state capacity, the bloc, whose membership is not constant, has changed the State as a whole, while creating a bureaucratic class-fragment that protects and advances its own interests (c.f. Hobsbawm 1982).

<sup>ii</sup>The LA Four were the young African American men charged with the widely televised beating of White truck driver Reginald Denny on April 29, 1992, the first day of the Uprising. Denny himself objected to the railroading of the Four.

<sup>iv</sup>The theoretical and empirical elaboration of these surpluses, and their transformation into prisons, is another segment of the project from which the present work is excerpted (see Gilmore 1998 and forthcoming).

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<sup>vii</sup>Helicopters are the premier symbol of Los Angeles's capitalized, militarized police force; choppers pulse and hover overhead day and night, coordinating motorized ground forces from a superior and flexible vantage point--mobilely panoptic, although lacking the stealth Bentham envisioned. Bear in mind LAPd invented the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Team specifically to police politically organized Black people (Bean 1973).

<sup>viii</sup>Wolch (1989) developed the "shadow state" concept to theorize state-sanctioned non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

<sup>x</sup>Prisoners are "unitized"--which is CDC jargon for "segregated."

<sup>xi</sup>A recurring irony in Mothers ROC cases--especially African Americans'--is how frequently the (extended) family knows, or is related to, a police officer (the frequency is related, of course, to the battle by Black people to gain access to state jobs). The fact helps mothers take a systemic, rather than individualized, view of their struggle. (c.f. Guérin 1994).

<sup>xii</sup>Many new Mothers tell the same story--they mortgage the house, or sell the car, in order to pay a lawyer whose contract, it turns out, is only to take the case through the most routine rounds of court filings and appearances. Further, the question of mortgaging or selling has its own racialized contradictions (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Massey and Denton 1992).

<sup>xix</sup>A recurrent theme in discussions among many of the shyer mothers is their avowal of, and explanation for, in their own unfitness. They refute the dominant explanations--they don't take drugs, rely on welfare, or work in the sex industry. But what lingers is a doubt whether they are women (and men) who might have trouble reading, or who have been afraid to stand up to the



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law, can ever be fit mothers for loved ones caught in a system in which book-knowledge and various types of intimidation--intellectual as well as physical--feature centrally in outcomes of cases. Many ask me to accompany them to meetings with officials because they feel stronger knowing that I know all the *words*--as well as the demographics, statistics, history, etc. As they teach each other what they learn, all of the ROCers gain confidence; indeed, those who cannot read well flourish by using their substantial memories to chart and compare cases (compare with Gilmore 1991 on the boys in the California Youth Authority).

<sup>xx</sup>According to the United Nations International Labor Organisation, women do 2/3 of the world's work, receive 5% of the income, and own 1% of the assets. Activist Margaret Prescod of the Wages for Housework Campaign interprets these figures as illuminating both sexism and racism on a global scale (Gilmore 1993).

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