The cruel urgencies of belonging: neoliberal individualism in progressive community organizing

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how entangled we are with one another while, at the same time, illustrated how unsuitable individualism is as an operative philosophy for the sustainability of our institutions and ways of being. The individualist assumptions undergirding neoliberalism are mobile and sticky, and organizing communities formed around justice-oriented values are not immune from their reach. To wrestle with how neoliberal logics can creep into and threaten the sustainability of organizing spaces mobilized toward progressive values, I draw on conversations with justice-oriented activists and organizers in my own organizing community in the southeastern U.S. during late summer and fall of 2020 – just months after COVID-19 shocked the world and uprisings against anti-Black racism demanded both a collective reckoning with state violence and the political will to construct life-affirming alternatives. I frame the impulses toward urgency and the challenges securing engaged mentorship as neoliberal productions that can contribute to organizers withdrawing from the organizing work entirely. I conclude by introducing the promise of "micro-utopic practices" through which we can work within and against the confines of neoliberal individualism to prefigure the anti-oppressive worlds many organizers strive to shape. By aligning our practices with relational ontologies – or philosophies of being that recognize and care for our entanglements – we can promote sustainability and disrupt the reproduction of harmful neoliberal rationalities in our movement spaces.

Keywords: community organizing; neoliberalism; ontology; relationality; sustainability; burnout; social movements

Introduction

"There's a season for everything," Stephanie said. When I finally developed the courage to resign from my leadership position in the organization where I was doing most of my political organizing work in 2019, I remember getting lots of advice to take care of myself: get a massage, go on a walk, take a bath. It was this piece of wisdom, though – that there's a season for everything – that really stuck with me. Not only did it remind me that there would surely be things to look forward to after I took this necessary step to disengage, but it also disrupted the notion of this move as some sort of permanent severing. It challenged the very paralyzing and linear teleology of organizing, then burning out, then moving on to other life activities in permanent abandon from

political work. It held, too, the promise of return, of moving through instead of burning out.

The much more common attempts at solace and support from friends and colleagues, though, rested firmly in the self-care current. Self-care discourse commonly focuses on the individual, the self, and obscures and fails to adequately hold accountable the social and political arrangements (i.e., capitalism, neoliberalism, racism) that produce and exacerbate the conditions that give rise to the need for organized mobilization and self-care in the first place. It's also commonly constructed as an activity outside of or separate from the practices of everyday life – a luxury, a worthy indulgence. It highlights, too, just how wholly unsustainable the conditions of everyday life are for so many that we're to find creative ways to cope so we can keep trudging along. By assigning responsibility to the individual to figure out how to maintain their capacity to labor, to produce, to compete, self-care discourse invokes neoliberal ideas about personal responsibility that threaten so much about social and political life, including the power of transformative organizing.

In this article, I draw on conversations I facilitated in 2020 with community organizers in the southeastern U.S. – on the heels of the COVID-19 outbreak and nationwide uprisings against anti-Black racism and state violence – about tensions and stuck places in their organizing to highlight how neoliberal, individualizing logics can circulate in justice-oriented organizing efforts, to the detriment of movement sustainability. I suggest experimenting with capacity-building practices as an anti-oppressive strategy that can disrupt neoliberal logics and support more sustainable and collectivist ways of relating in organizing spaces. I begin by outlining my theoretical approach to neoliberalism as a "governing rationality" (Brown, 2015, p. 9) that territorializes conceptions of the subject and of responsibility. In the second section, I offer a brief overview of the process and context that shaped my collaboration with organizers in my own circle of community, whose insights animate this piece. In the third section, I weave in comments from the organizers I spoke with to consider how neoliberal individualism can condition ways of engaging in justice-oriented organizing efforts, perpetuating a sense of urgency and productivist pressure that jeopardize engaged mentorship and belonging. I conclude by offering *micro-utopic practices* as a conceptual entry point for rejecting the pull of neoliberal individualism and more strategically and collaboratively aligning our organizing practices with the kind of relational, anti-oppressive worlds we're struggling to create.

Conceptualizing neoliberalism as governmentality

Neoliberalism has become such a ubiquitous analytical approach that it's not always clear what people mean when they invoke it. Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010) described neoliberalism as a "rascal concept" that is "promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested" (p. 1).   I agree with Hall (2011) that despite the

many critiques of neoliberalism as too amorphous a concept to have any utility, "there are enough common features to warrant giving it a provisional conceptual identity" (p. 706). With Foucault (1979/2008), I conceptualize neoliberalism as a governing discourse that circulates through all aspects of life and is capable of attaching to already-existing norms, practices, and concepts. This definition lends itself to analyzing the myriad ways neoliberalizing technologies infiltrate seemingly discrete parts of our lives. In other words, neoliberalism isn't a single, totalizing force; it is a set of assumptions about the self, the economy, and the social world that can seep into and reshape already-existing programs, policies, and practices. It is also beneficial for understanding the paradox of neoliberal discourses circulating in progressive movements and organizations working for justice who, at times, perpetuate neoliberalizing logics in their policies, practices, and ideologies.

In describing neoliberal governmentality, Foucault (1979/2008) alluded to the way that *government* not only entails the administration of state-based programs, but also functions as a subjectifying tool wherein, as Lemke (2001) explained, the "modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence" (p. 191). This relationship is not unlike Foucault's (1975/1995) revamped theory of the Panopticon wherein prisoners who, believing themselves to be under constant surveillance by prison guards, begin to discipline and surveil themselves according to the established rules and expectations. In the case of the Panopticon and of neoliberal governance, the aims and interests of the state are redistributed onto individuals themselves to facilitate their control.

Foucault (1979/2008) also articulated a related component of neoliberal governance that enables this redistributionary move: He described neoliberalism as comprising "a sort of economic analysis of the non-economic" (p. 243) such that relationships in the social world are governed by market logic whose purview once rested solely in the economic domain. Brown (2015) clarified Foucault's position, describing neoliberalism as "an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life" (p. 30). This figuration is unique in that it positions neoliberalism as a discourse that circulates, mutates, and attaches to existing concepts to the effect of transforming "every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic" (Brown, 2015, p. 10). Discourse, in this sense, isn't purely a linguistic phenomenon; instead, it is productive and entangled with the material, such that Foucault (1972/2010) described discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49). These two aspects – neoliberalism as a subjectifying, governing discourse and as the application of economic logic to the social world – clarify how neoliberalism is capable of mutating and co-opting progressive efforts at political change.

Neoliberalism's foundational ontology: the responsibilized, individual subject

The discursive analysis that governmentality offers also explains how neoliberalism reshapes the *subject* in economic terms, giving rise to notions of human capital that demand investment and care for the sake of ongoing production, reifying capitalist notions of profit, production, and efficiency. Foucault (1979/2008) described this as a transition from a subject of exchange in classical liberalism – wherein individuals participate as barterers in economic transactions – to a "subject of interest" (p. 273) who makes choices to maximize their self-interests. Brown (2015) extended and complicated this analysis, situating neoliberalism in the current times and proffering as core to the modern neoliberal project the *responsibilized subject*, a "responsible self-investor and self-provider" who is "forced to engage in a particular form of self-sustenance that meshes with the morality of the state and health of the economy" (p. 84). In other words, the ontological assumption at work – the philosophy of *being* underlying neoliberal logic – is that we are each singular individuals vested with the personal responsibility and accountability to craft our way. This emphasis on the individual, in turn, significantly unburdens state-based programs and institutions of the provision of welfare and the common good.

Generally, Foucauldian conceptions of governmentality explain how "neo-liberal strategies of rule [...] encourage people to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own wellbeing" (Larner, 2000, p. 13). In this way, neoliberal governmentality explains the set of decentralized relationships, discourses, and processes seemingly outside of but deeply entangled with the state apparatus that reassign responsibility for wellbeing from the welfare state to the crafty, resilient individual subject. In the case of community organizing spaces, as I soon describe, this engrained individualizing paradigm can threaten the community care and infrastructure needed to actualize and sustain the scale of social change many organizers seek to create.

Individual choice and cruel attachments

Lemke (2001) and Brown (2015) related the strategy of neoliberal governance to Enlightenment-era notions of free will and rational actors. Enlightenment thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries (i.e., Hume, Locke, Descartes) crafted theories about what it means to be and to know, specifically rooting *being* in our capacity to *know* ("I think, therefore I am"), to rationalize, to individuate, to *choose*. The Enlightenment-era "subject of individual choices" (Foucault, 1979/2008, p. 272), which neoliberal rationality exploits, becomes the site of responsibility for the outcomes of the choices they make. Relatedly, Lemke (2001) described neoliberalism's construction of

> *prudent subjects* whose moral quality is based on the fact that they rationally assess costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to other alternative acts. As the choice of options for action is, or so the neo-liberal notion of rationality would have it, the expression of free will on the basis of a self-determined decision, the consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them. (p. 201; emphasis added)

These Cartesian theories of the rational humanist subject with free will, which "we've repeated [...] again and again so it seems normal, natural, and real" (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 2), persist in our current times and constitute a sort of naturalized order, permeating the most ordinary things. On the one hand, it's understandable how this could feel empowering and thus a difficult principle to abandon; if rationality rules, then we are each ostensibly *in control* of what happens to us. But on the other hand, in a world where the contours of our "rational choices" and "free will" are circumscribed by legacies of harm, systematic subjugation, and evasive promises that we can be anything we want to be as long as we work hard enough, "free will can become a heavy burden" (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 43).

Neoliberal rationality cleverly fashions this burden as obligatory, if not desirable, such that the lure of "choice" becomes a cruel attachment, "a muse into which we place our most dearly-held fantasies for the life we want" (Bivens, 2023, p. 5). a choice to choose "choice." Berlant (2011) described "optimistic attachment[s]" as involving a "sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (p. 2). The cruelty lies in how inaccessible the fantasy is and how the constant striving toward it "contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place" (Berlant, 2011, p. 25). In other words, as I've described elsewhere (Bivens, 2023),"cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1) is a "paradoxical relation, one in which the object of our desire is, at the same time, a debilitating, precarity-inducing, or incapacitating force" (Bivens, 2023, p. 6). We might think about "individual choice" as a cruel attachment, a neoliberal discursive construction that reassigns responsibility for wellbeing from the state to the individual, legitimizing public underinvestment and contributing to precarity and inequality. At the same time, "individual choice" conjures a spirit of personal industriousness, the ultimate exercise of freedom typified by a romanticized American nationalism. It elicits, too, an idealized vision of a future that, though always deferred, hovers on the horizon as an imagined possibility. Only certain individual choices will help us approximate this mythic state, generating a sense of optimism that – because it is continually deferred – Berlant (2011) called "cruel" (p. 1).

Individual choice remains a powerful governing desire even as it "contributes to the attrition" (Berlant, 2011, p. 25) of social wellbeing and justifies institutional neglect of transformative social and political action. Neoliberal

strategies of governance are so inconspicuous precisely because responsibility for their maintenance and renewal *circulates across* seemingly discrete components of our social world, from entire industries shaped around personal branding and self-improvement to discourses about meritocracy that are deeply connected to American national identity. In this way, neoliberal strategies of governance occupy the delicate, paradoxical nexus of positioning the individual as the sole author of their plight while deputizing individuals to take up the economic and political interests of the state. As Tomlinson (2013) noted, "[n]eoliberalism works to reshape arguments about identity and structural power: rather than making the personal political, it makes the political personal" (p. 999). This move maintains proximity between the state and the individual for surveillance and control purposes while, at the same time, absolving the state from investing in the enabling conditions for economic and social security.

Collaborative inquiries: contemplating tensions and stuck places in community organizing

To explore how neoliberal discourses and practices threaten the sustainability of justice-oriented community organizing engagements, I draw on conversations I facilitated over a four-month period in 2020 with community organizers and activists I know and worked alongside to advance social, economic, and racial justice in our small city in the southeastern U.S. I facilitated one-on-one conversations and roundtable dialogues with nine organizers whose identities span various lines of race, language, nationality, education, gender, and class difference and whose work covers a range of issue areas, from immigrants' rights to educational justice.[1] We discussed the tensions and stuck places in our organizing and our visions for what we'd need to sustain and nourish our engagement. Specifically, in our roundtable dialogues, we explored turning points in our work, contemplated what we need to thrive in our organizing settings, and brainstormed key themes for sustainability in community organizing. In our one-on-one conversations, we discussed how we decide where to direct our energy; reflected on successful and troublesome collaborations; grappled with times when we felt stuck, overwhelmed, or uncertain; and named organizing moments that were particularly joyful or pleasurable. Through these engagements emerged insights into the pressures and discourses that contribute to tensions in organizing, as well as wisdom as to what supports are necessary to promote sustainable and nourishing organizing efforts. While my focus here is on the

[1] The conversations I describe in this article occurred as part of my dissertation research on burnout and sustainability in justice-oriented community organizing and education (Bivens, 2021). In that larger study informed by post qualitative and scholar-activist methodologies, I drew on post-foundational and Black feminist theories to deconstruct burnout and self-care discourses, with a particular focus on what ontology can teach us about the challenges and possibilities of aligning organizing practice with collectivist, relational, and anti-oppressive principles.

former, I should note that our conversations were also full of joyful recollections, laughter, and vignettes about the pleasures and victories of organizing that keep many of us engaged, a powerful reminder that organizing work can be ambivalent, complex, and delightfully messy.

The small city in the southeastern United States where all the organizers I spoke with are based is replete with both nonprofit organizations (there are over 400 of them!) that strive to meet various direct service needs and grassroots political organizing arrangements that are not necessarily ensnared in the nonprofit industrial complex. Many people describe the town as a "blue dot in a red state" for its left-leaning political orientation as compared to the surrounding counties and to the state as a whole, which had long been decidedly conservative until organizations led by Black organizers and Organizers of Color facilitated an impressive Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate in 2020. Given this, there's a fair amount of progressive energy in the community that ballooned following the 2016 presidential election, after which hundreds of people in the city came together for the largest march in its history. Many people got involved in politics for the first time then, new justice-oriented organizations were formed, and existing political organizations fighting for social and economic justice saw their membership increase exponentially.

The folks I collaborated with for this inquiry had been engaged in organizing efforts specifically focused on racial, social, and economic justice of some sort, some of them for decades and others only since Donald Trump's election. Some organizers were also elected officials and have a long history of community-based advocacy, while others saw their political advocacy work as emerging or just beginning. The organizers I spoke with have been involved in efforts to influence local policy, pressure major institutions, elect progressive state and/or local candidates, and/or orchestrate (and win!) their own bids for public office. These collaborators have worked with organizations that are loose networks or coalitions of organizers without formal nonprofit status, issue-based nonprofits with access to grants and other funding sources, and volunteer-run political advocacy organizations that rely on member donations. I believe their insights into the tensions in community organizing – the neoliberal threads of which I explore in this article – and their imaginings for organizing sustainability will resonate with current and future organizers working to create anti-oppressive change.

Neoliberal discourses in community organizing

The cruel urgencies of belonging

I spoke with one organizer, Carmen[2], who attributed tensions and stuck places in her organizing largely to a sense of urgency and a lack of mentorship that

[2] All names herein are pseudonyms that the organizer-collaborators selected for themselves to protect their anonymity.

threatened feelings of belonging and contributed to her decision to disengage. Carmen considered herself relatively new to organizing and, during her senior year of college, she volunteered heavily in a coalitional effort to hold the local university accountable for its legacy of racism and history of relying on enslaved labor. We are close friends and have collaborated on organizing projects, and yet, before sitting down for an outdoor, distanced pizza and beer in late 2020, we hadn't talked at length about some of our shared perceptions on the challenges and possibilities of organizing. Carmen told me about the prevalence of conflict and the sense of urgency in the coalitional effort where she located most of her organizing experience. The coalition was a loose network of newer organizers like Carmen and veteran organizer-elders, an intergenerational collaboration that isn't common in the city's progressive organizing settings. Its trajectory was driven mostly by young organizers, and Carmen reflected on how this shaped the culture of urgency:

> Especially in western culture or with young people [...] there's this need for instant gratification. [...] For most questions that we have, we can just look 'em up, and we're used to our needs being met rather quickly. So when I'm in a space of a bunch of young people who want instant results, there's just naturally going to be burnout.

This expectation to move quickly was exacerbated given the role of technology in the organizing; much of the planning occurred on social media and messaging platforms, which, designed to be accessible from anywhere, anytime, can function as another mechanism by which to track production and participation.

The expectation to ceaselessly participate in the organizing and planning conversations created a dynamic wherein, as Carmen put it, "people [felt] like they don't have time to restore personal intimacies or personal relationships because they have to focus on the work." Carmen went on to reflect on how this expectation to be all-in for "the work" contributed, too, to a lack of a sense of belonging:

> I also didn't feel as accepted in [the] organizing space as I had hoped. I felt like there was a requirement to have a personality that meant that I move very quickly, I had to sacrifice my other interests, and I had to devote everything to this cause all day, every day. Need to be in the messages, need to reply, need to be available, and if I'm not, it's a testament to my commitment.

The sense of urgency that Carmen described is common in organizing communities. Gorski (2015), for example, connected it to a "culture of martyrdom" (p. 707). Relatedly, Rodgers (2010) described a "ubiquitous discourse of selflessness" (p. 279) that produced similar pressures for continuous and fast-paced engagement and connected those expectations to

perceptions about one's dedication to the work. Carmen's connections between the sacrificial expectation to "devote everything" and the pace at which this ongoing investment was expected to proceed suggest a neoliberalized discourse at work. Not only was Carmen expected to narrow the scope of her engagements, in large part, to those ostensibly related to organizing, but this expectation also functioned as an efficiency-making tool. It was an importation of the same speed-up logic that capitalists used to control factory workers, a mode of hastening and increasing the production of a desired outcome.

Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism" (p. 1) is a useful analytic for thinking about how speed, desired futures, and one's perceived sense of belonging in organizing spaces can converge as neoliberalized reinforcements. Returning to Berlant (2011),

> optimism is cruel when it takes shape as an affectively stunning double bind: a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent. (p. 51)

In other words, the idea is that a specific outcome is going to bring happiness or satisfaction once-and-for-all, but social, economic, and political forces make that outcome remarkably difficult to achieve, inducing a sort of constant striving. Optimism that is attached to an outcome or process that, paradoxically, inhibits that which it promises is cruel in that it entices without ever fully and finally satisfying. Carmen spoke about how she "didn't feel as accepted" in the coalitional organizing and that she "didn't think that [she was] someone who had enough clout or respect or authority to have a good opinion," attributing these perceptions, in large part, to the urgency and total devotion that circulated as unspoken expectations. We might consider the pressure to participate in a particular way and to a particular extent in order to experience acceptance or belonging as a "relation of cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). For Carmen to approximate the scope of change she aimed to impact through organizing, she often confronted pressure to perform a certain kind of engagement and intensity, in turn making it difficult to meaningfully and sustainably participate in the justice-oriented efforts in which she was invested. The sense of belonging Carmen desired in and through organizing was constantly deferred, made inaccessible by the neoliberalized expectations surrounding what constituted valid and dedicated modes of contributing to the work. The neoliberal notion at work here invites the following "cruel" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1) logic: If only Carmen had chosen to be active in one more thread, or attended one more meeting, perhaps then she would have, once-and-for-all, gained the sense of trust and community she needed to feel affirmed and comfortable sharing her ideas and opinions.

Montgomery and bergman (2017), relatedly, described how "radicalism becomes an ideal, and everyone is deficient in comparison" (p. 20). For them, "rigid radicalism" (p. 169) can induce burnout and is an enactment of what

they called Empire, or "the web of control that exploits and administers life – ranging from the most brutal forms of domination to the subtlest inculcation of anxiety and isolation" (p. 48). This idealization "imports Empire's tendencies of fixing, governing, disciplining, and controlling, while presenting these as a means of liberation or revolution" (Montgomery & bergman, 2017, pp. 173-4). This kind of romanticized relation, wherein the discourse in the organizing community is one in which one's dedication to the work or fitness as an organizer is attached to a specific, hyper-present, hyper-invested form of engagement, replicates a neoliberal logic that valorizes individual choice and productivity while contributing to the "attrition or the wearing out of the subject" (Berlant, 2011, p. 28).

The urgent and sacrificial expectations that Carmen connected to her sense of belonging underscore how an individualist ontological orientation that is attached to a sense of urgency to produce and participate in a purist, singular way can paradoxically manifest through suggestions to get out of the way (i.e., sideline other components of life not seemingly directly related to the work) while simultaneously remaining hyper-present, hyper-invested in a singular type of engagement. Carmen's insights are so illuminating because they draw attention to how individualist, productivist discourses can create the conditions for unhealthy, unsustainable organizing that, ironically, threaten the very aims of the work in the first place. In other words, a looming expectation to prioritize the demands of organizing over the health of the relationships that make it possible can generate conflicts or feelings of organizer dissatisfaction that jeopardize the collective capacity to do the work at all.

"It is difficult to mentor someone else when you are so burned out": On the challenges of capacity-building

The individualism underlying neoliberal discourse contributes not only to a state of social precarity that makes dedicating time to organizing (particularly for unpaid organizers) difficult but also to an individualist work ethic that can circulate in community organizing settings themselves. During our conversations, the organizer-collaborators and I talked at length about mentorship in community organizing, specifically in relation to conflicts or stuck places in our work and to the relationships in organizing we need to thrive. In this section, I draw on the organizers' comments about the need for mentors before tracing the challenges of mentorship and capacity-building in largely volunteer-based organizing settings. Specifically, I suggest that the widespread social and economic precarity wrought by neoliberal capitalism creates a context that positions organizers to replicate its logics by working individually to meet the urgency of the moment rather than investing in collective capacity-building or relational networks of support. This contributes to a cruel cycle wherein organizers personally take on additional labor to more quickly approximate a desired outcome which serves to further enhance their

overwork and threaten capacity for future, more distributed and sustainable organizing.

Mentorship: The challenges of intergenerational knowledge sharing

Many of the organizers I spoke with reflected on the paucity of organizing and political mentors. Taylor's political work has spanned grassroots and electoral settings. He credited the Occupy Wall Street movement with his growing involvement, and, since then, he founded a local progressive political organization and ran for – and won! – local elected office. I consider Taylor one of my political mentors and a close friend. We've collaborated on several organizing projects, so hearing him talk so candidly about his own views on mentorship was especially insightful. While he named a handful of folks he considers mentors, he noted that "mentors are hard to come by" and sometimes when he tried "to build relationships with others, elders in the community" he was met with "disinterest." For Taylor, this contributed to a sort of improvisational ethos in his work. They were making mistakes, learning, and growing along the way: "There's not a school for this," Taylor said.

In our one-on-one conversation, Anna echoed Taylor's sentiment, also commenting that mentors "are hard to come by." Anna, a longtime local resident, joined the large community of people who became more politically engaged after Donald Trump was elected President in 2016. She grew increasingly passionate about electoral politics as a lever for progressive change and led the local Democratic Party's candidate development committee for two years. Anna talked about how she perceived the local political landscape as quite new and minimally active, so there was a dearth of mentors because it seemed like no one had really done the work before. For Anna, this called for a similar spirit of improvisation that Taylor invoked:

> So we really had to invent it, just like, picking up tidbits here and there from different people. And on one hand [...] that's kind of empowering to feel like, "Okay, nobody seems to know what we should do, we're just gonna have to figure it out on our own." On the other hand, there's not much devoting to an effort like that, you know, when you're working on volunteers, like me, who will invest stuff and work hard on it *and then disappear and leave hardly a trace of what they've done*. (emphasis added)

In other words, Anna connected the scarcity of mentor and organizational support to an ambivalent process wherein it was both exciting to be able to invent an approach to candidate development and exhausting because of the immense amount of work that creation entails. So, for Anna, creating a sort of archive that could support future organizers (so they don't also have to start from scratch and then grow overworked) is an important strategy for long-

term sustainability. She mentioned that she had wanted to create a candidate development handbook for future organizers to use, but this is one of the projects that fell through the cracks compared to the other, more immediate demands of organizing like conducting electoral research and identifying and training Democratic candidates to run against Republicans in upcoming local and statewide elections.

Carmen, the labor and racial justice organizer I introduced in the previous section, described how mentor support might have helped mitigate the lack of acceptance and sense of urgency that permeated her organizing experience. When I asked about relationships she would need to nourish her organizing engagement, Carmen talked about the need for "more older Black people involved in the organizing" who share a similar radical politic who could serve as mentors to the younger Black organizers like herself. Carmen connected the guidance of mentors and elders who share her politics and racial identity to the sustainability of the work, drawing on her perceptions of organizing efforts in the nearby large, metropolitan city where she found progressive organizing communities that were more intergenerational. She noted that in these settings, older folks help set the tone by "sharing their experience and say[ing], 'this is the pace, this is what will work.'" For Carmen, relationships with mentors and elders held the promise for more healthy and sustainable practices in movement settings.

Sharing responsibilities: The trouble of making time

In the roundtable discussions, the group also talked about how difficult it can be to mentor someone else when there are so many other demands on time. Taylor, the grassroots organizer who's now an elected official, spoke about the immense amount of work it can take to mentor and delegate. He mentioned how in his work with the social and economic justice organization he co-founded (prior to winning his election as a local legislator), the work relied on volunteers, so he collaborated with "whoever walked in the god damn door." He felt like he had to display an almost excessive enthusiasm to retain people. He disclosed the challenges of relying on volunteerism, noting that he often took on additional work himself because "it's hard to find people." He described his thought process as: "I know I can do it [the task/project], and I'm just gonna do it. That way I don't have to worry about it." In many ways, this is analogous to Taylor's challenges in getting the support he needed in his role as a local elected official, a position that does not come with staff. He similarly had to personally arrange a process to bring on an intern to support his government work. He spoke specifically about the challenges of mentoring an intern:

> It takes so much work and so much structure for me to do that. I really found myself feeling like I either had to choose to […] get something productive done, like get it done, as I knew it needed to be done, or […] teach somebody through

> this and maybe not get it done and maybe have to do it myself anyways at the end, and really just not having [...] time or ability to do both things.

For Taylor, taking the time to mentor or educate someone else, while important, can mean risking the careful completion of the task or foregoing some of the more immediate projects that beckon.

Lydia also spoke about the difficulty of getting volunteer support, which contributed to her personal overwork. Lydia is a local artist who coordinated volunteers, designed graphics, strategized legislative action, and contributed to myriad other efforts in a volunteer-run, grassroots social and economic justice advocacy organization. Lydia described how hard it was to get volunteers to sign up for specific tasks:

> I spent a lot of time trying to get people to fill roles that [...] needed to be filled, and that almost never worked. It almost never worked to like, have a role then try to reach out to people to fill it. [...] People would show up and kinda do what they wanted to do.

Lydia shared how this labor-intensive effort to find and train volunteers for pre-existing tasks or projects sometimes just wasn't worth it:

> It seemed like delegating took more work than just doing the thing myself. [...] So a lot of the time I was doing the stuff that I shoulda been getting volunteers to do the stuff for me because I couldn't get a volunteer to do it or it was too much trouble to get somebody else.

In other words, Lydia struggled to find the volunteer support she needed and so was cast into a position of laboring individually.

Anna contextualized a similar concern, noting how her role as candidate development chair was unpaid. As a volunteer organizer, she felt especially frustrated and resentful about the lack of support from others:

> So recruiting volunteers is tough, and hanging on to volunteers, and finding people who will actually do what they say is tough because people are not getting paid for this usually. It made me kind of resentful in a leadership role, of, "So why does it have to be *me* doing all of this work? I'm not getting paid anything. Why am I kind of left high and dry and people come through and they're not stepping up to really help and do the work?"

Anna wasn't compensated to lead the candidate development committee for the local Democratic Party even though she invested nearly 20 hours a week in

the role. This problem contributed to her resentment and uncertainty about whether other people actually cared about the work, despite what they may have said. Here, neoliberalism enables conditions in which social action and civic engagement are so socially devalued that political organizing is typically unpaid work. And when it is compensated, it's often molded by the pressures of what James (2013) called the "corporate Left" (p. 58) that latches on to nonprofit organizations and awards massive grants for very particular types of tame and acceptable projects, bolstering the nonprofit industrial complex and "nurturing a particular ideological and structural *allegiance* to state authority that preempts political radicalisms" (Rodriguez, 2017/2007, p. 29). The difficulty of finding volunteer labor for progressive change efforts in a neoliberalized social world that incentivizes personal economic growth and self-sufficiency over collectivism is not entirely surprising. Neoliberal discourse also impacts participation in civic life. Participation in civic institutions is declining (Denton & Voth, 2016) alongside Americans' trust of government and of one another (Rainie & Perrin, 2019). This tendency toward individualism, aided by neoliberal discourses, increases fragmentation and diminishes trust in collective processes and notions of the collective good.

This neoliberal trend of divestment in social change organizations (particularly those suspicious of attaching themselves to the state-endorsed nonprofit industrial complex) such that organizers don't have the infrastructural support or capacity they need to transition to the next project can create scenarios where they truly get stuck in a role they didn't necessarily want in the first place or no longer wished to be in. Anna, the candidate development organizer, emphasized how a lack of people to do the work contributed to her decision to assume a leadership role in the first place. Anna described being "thrust into" her role leading candidate development efforts for the local chapter of the Democratic Party: "I didn't really want to be the person in charge but it just seemed like there was nobody else […] stepping forward to do it."

V described a similar sentiment. V is a long-time organizer and elected official who describes her advocacy as "organic." She participated in local educational advocacy efforts in the 1980s aimed at electing more Black school board members and has since worked with a variety of labor and economic justice organizations in addition to serving on the school board and as a local legislator. She spoke about how difficult it was to step back from a particular project despite feeling like it was the time:

> The only reason why I think I've drug it out this long, […] longer than it should be is because one lady had convinced me that I needed to […] stay involved. And then another gentleman, […] he was like, "What are we gonna do when you leave?"

Both Anna and V expressed an attachment to this notion that no one else can or will step up, which made it difficult for each of them to contribute in a

sustainable and desirable way. The sense of feeling overwhelmed, as if the whole project might just crumble if one person leaves, is familiar to me, as well. I stayed in my role as coordinator of the social and economic justice organization months longer than I otherwise would have because I feared no one would replace me and the organization I cared about would collapse. However, had there been a sustained and coordinated effort to archive and communicate institutional knowledge while also building up future leaders, I imagine I would have felt more confident stepping back.

Harriett had a similar take, attributing the difficulty of mentoring to what she described as "burnout" and the demoralizing exhaustion that can come from years of the kind of political advocacy many people – particularly political conservatives – are antagonistic toward. Harriett is the director of a local nonprofit organization that focuses on civic engagement and economic justice. She spoke of her many years leading voter engagement efforts and how immovable, resistant, and even sometimes downright insulting people could be:

> And so I think after [...] sixteen years of those "no's", you don't let it affect you, but at some point it does affect you. That interferes with your ability to try to mentor someone. You don't have any energy to mentor anyone. Like right now I got some young folks working with me but I'm pretty much hopin' that – I'm trying to give them stuff to read and that kinda stuff because I kinda just can't go through it again. I said I was gonna write a book but I didn't. [...] Maybe I might still do it but I feel like it's late. [...] So, I just don't have the energy to go through those experiences again and try to explain it to someone again. You just get tired of asking, tired of talkin' about it, and it just gets to be, you know, too much after a while. [...] And you know you need to get someone to take your place because, you know, it needs to go on, but after a while you just saying, "well they'll get it, the world will go on with or without what I know." [...] It is difficult to mentor someone else when you are so burned out.

As director of a nonprofit, Harriett does receive a salary for her work and yet the scope of the injustices she's advocating against – low wages, poor working conditions, voter suppression, lack of community engagement, and more – coupled with the demoralizing impacts of all the "no's" over the years, has contributed to what Harriett described as "burnout." She touched on how the lack of energy to mentor, in turn, reinforces a sense of isolation, creating a frustrating loop. She offered a marching band as a metaphor for this experience:

> And you are just marching and you are so proud of what you're doing and you're just marching, marching, marching, and then you decide to look back, and you notice that your band has all sit down on the sidewalks and you're out there just marching by yourself.

The years of exhaustion and overwork have led Harriett to struggle with building the kind of organizational capacity that could revitalize and collectivize the work and facilitate her comfort stepping back after her decades of leadership. In turn, Harriett has put the book she wants to write – which could facilitate the work of younger generations and contribute to intergenerational collaboration – on the backburner to respond to seemingly more immediate organizational demands.

Neoliberal antagonism toward capacity-building

The comments of these organizers offer a glimpse at how organizing and building collective power in the context of neoliberalism is difficult, especially given neoliberalism's historical antagonism toward social movements. Hong (2015) described how neoliberalism took hold in the wake of the 1960s liberation movements as a "brutal crackdown by the forces of the state as well as the incorporation and affirmation of those aspects of these movements that were appropriable" (p. 11). Anti-colonial, racial justice, and anti-capitalist movements pose a direct threat to neoliberalism's precarity-inducing logic of individualism and privatization. Butler (2015) described precarity as "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (p. 33). The precarity wrought by neoliberal capitalism – like low wages, long working days, unaffordable housing, and expensive, privatized healthcare – coerces organizers into replicating its logics by working individually to meet the urgency of the moment rather than slowing down to invest in collective capacity-building or relational networks of support. Put another way, neoliberalism is crafty. It justifies the dismantling of community and public support while making us believe we are primarily responsible for our struggles, inviting a sort of desperate personal effort to persevere. Anna didn't make the candidate development handbook she had planned before she left her candidate development role and Harriett hasn't written her book; these infrastructure-building projects were sidelined in favor of producing the quick, visible results that neoliberal capitalism demands.

Ultimately, the paucity of mentorship support that some of the organizers expressed and the challenges of mentoring and capacity-building that others discussed reflect a paradoxical relation: On the one hand, newer organizers want mentors to help set the pace, bring in resources and wisdom, and provide guidance. On the other hand, taking the time to recruit and educate volunteer laborers or to archive prior efforts – particularly in a precarity-inducing economy where overwork and underpay is the norm – creates additional labor for experienced organizers that doesn't necessarily have an immediate payoff. In this way, neoliberal conditions and the related search for more immediate returns produce scenarios in organizing spaces where organizers are positioned as deputies for neoliberal logic. Specifically, they are made into "*responsibilized individuals* [...] required to provide for themselves in the

context of powers and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so" (Brown, 2015, p. 134; emphasis added). In the excerpts shared above, organizers were driven to labor individually because the work of building capacity was just too difficult in a context where there's just *so much that needs to be done* and finding volunteer labor or providing mentor support would supplant another, seemingly more pressing need.

Toward relational, emergent ontologies for sustainable community organizing

In focusing on how neoliberal discourse can shape experiences with urgency, belonging, and mentoring in community organizing, I don't wish to suggest that the aim is to somehow create a space completely insulated from forces like neoliberalism. In fact, the governmentality conception of neoliberalism shaping my analysis doesn't tolerate binary inside/outside reductions, and part of what makes neoliberal discourse so sinister is precisely its capacity for mobility and mutation. My aim, instead, is to elevate the discourse and its operative individualist ontology so that we might be better prepared to name it, respond to it, and ponder practices that are rooted in relational, collectivist assumptions about knowledge and being. When we consult other, more relational theoretical foundations, what creative possibilities for moving through stuck places and tensions in our organizing might emerge that can support collective sustainability?

Relational entanglements

One of the dangers of neoliberal logic's construction and romanticization of the individual is how it obscures the much more complex set of relationships that condition the perceived set of choices we believe ourselves to have and thus our perceived avenues for thought and action. Yet, there are many compelling theoretical traditions that challenge individualism and the self/other divide. Societies spanning time and geographies do live and have lived ontologies other than that described by Cartesian humanism. Indigenous and decolonial feminisms have forwarded relational ethics and ways of being (i.e., Anzaldúa, 2015; TallBear, 2014; Watts, 2013). Black studies and Black feminist scholars have offered a critique of Western liberal humanism in the context of enslavement and enduring, racialized systems of domination (i.e., Gumbs, 2020; Hartman, 1997; McKittrick, 2006 & 2021; Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 2003). And posthumanist and new materialist thinkers (i.e., Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Chen, 2012; Coole & Frost, 2010) have posited an entangled relationship between self/other, past/present, and cause/effect, assigning vitality and agency more expansively. Barad (2010) suggested "the co-constitution of determinately bounded and propertied entities" (p. 253) and posited the *entangled relation* as the onto-epistemological unit (rather than the singular atom, for example, or the spoken/written word). Relational ontologies and critiques of Enlightenment-era humanism from across

disciplines and theoretical traditions offer powerful reminders of the possibility of departing from the individualist subject, "which is so tangled in separation and domination" (Gumbs, 2020, p. 9), and of rethinking the ontological unit and its bounds.

When we take the relation as the cluster of interest, as opposed to the individuated self of Cartesian humanism, another conception of responsibility emerges that renders the neoliberalized notion of personal responsibility unthinkable, or, at least, unconvincing. Brown (2015) noted how neoliberal discourse and its underlying ontological assumptions construct "responsibilized individuals [who] are required to provide for themselves in the context of powers and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so" (p. 134). Put another way, it's exceedingly difficult to secure essential economic and social supports, especially given a diminishing welfare state, a paucity of social and leisure infrastructure, and a capitalistic economy that relies on worker exploitation to operate. But an ontological orientation that takes the relation as the unit of analysis challenges the idea of an atomized self who is fully deputized for their independent wellbeing and rationally enacts free-will to craft their lives. This, in turn, makes appeals to and solutions rooted in meritocracy and self-made-ness far less convincing, because it exposes all the connections and contingencies upon which this idea of the individual self relies. In an interview with the *Proud Flesh* journal, Sylvia Wynter shared, "It is this issue of the 'genre' of 'Man' that causes all the 'isms'" (Thomas, 2006, p. 20). So, we might better attend to the harms of neoliberalism when we situate it within the particular ontological universe in which it is thinkable. This isn't to say that we can think our way out of neoliberal-induced precarity, or that simply naming an aspirational relational ontology solves the material and resource disinvestment that neoliberalism promotes. Yet, starting with theory can help us recalibrate our habits and priorities and carve out a space in our daily lives and movement practice to work within and against neoliberal individualism.

Micro-utopic practices

While the individualist, Cartesian ontologies exploited by neoliberalism are normative and dominant in the U.S., they are not totalizing. Progressive political organizing sites are especially ripe for experimenting with practices that align with, or prefigure, the kind of world(s) we strive to create through organizing in the first place. Community organizing spaces are, largely, already engaged in the political work of reforming/transforming/abolishing harmful systems and institutions. Organizers – despite the tensions, conflicts, frustrations, and stuck places they've experienced along the way – also, at times, have lived and organized in accordance with a relational, emergent ontology. I offer *micro-utopic practices* as a concept through which to enter into the project of deterritorializing neoliberal norms and aligning practice with relational theories and ontologies. Utopia, in this sense, isn't a static and determined future but rather "dynamic spaces committed to relational ways of

being, spaces that are never done, never finalized, always in process and becoming" (Jones & Woglom, 2016, p. 159). For The Care Collective (2020), creating these spaces involves building up "care infrastructure" (p. 60) through collectivizing resources, creating flourishing public spaces, and embracing shorter working hours, just to name a few.

For organizing efforts like those described above, I conceptualize *micro-utopic practices* as those that strive to align our habits, discourses, and working norms with the ethical and political frameworks guiding our advocacy by, in part, supporting and provisioning care infrastructure for our movement spaces. To dislodge from the neoliberally inflected challenges that impact mentoring, pacing, and capacity-building in justice-oriented movement spaces, we might consider co-mentoring and archiving as two micro-utopic practices that can support an infrastructure aligned with collectivist, relational ontologies.

Co-mentoring commitments

Co-mentoring has a rich theoretical lineage in feminist and critical scholarship and forwards a non-hierarchical conception of mentoring, challenging one-way mentoring approaches and acknowledging the multiple and varied sites of knowledge production (Godbee & Novotny, 2013; Moss et. al., 1999). Co-mentoring assumes a certain relationality by suggesting we are shaped and reshaped in community. Top-down mentoring reinforces individual ontologies and oppressive power hierarchies by assuming a one-way flow of power and knowledge. Naming a co-mentoring commitment, creating new spaces, and building in opportunities to already-existing activities for the collaborative exchange and development of knowledge can horizontalize the organizing structure and support a collectivist ethos. This discursive shift can also help take some of the pressure off any one person to "be" a mentor; instead, mentoring becomes a collaborative and emergent practice, a fixture of the day-to-day doings rather than a separate obligation.

Archival practices

Archiving offers another promising avenue through which to realign practice with relational ontologies. Naming and embracing relationality as a theoretical commitment can reshape how we treat the work of archiving – from a luxury side project to entertain when outside demands slow down (like Harriett and Anna described) to a priority integral to the collectivity and sustainability of the work. Curating and prioritizing archival practices in our movement spaces can help us organize and pass on knowledges and resources so organizers like Harriett and Taylor don't have to experience the immense and unfair pressure of bearing the weight of the work largely independently. It can also relieve the sense of starting-from-scratch that Anna shared and complexify ahistoricized approaches to community action steeped in a misguided sense of novelty about the work we are doing. Before resigning from my leadership role in the

community organization to which I devoted so much time, I helped draft a proposal for us to add an archivist position to the Board of Directors and connected with archivists at the local university library, who proposed an agreement to archive our organizational work since its early days and into the future. Thankfully, a dear comrade followed through on this partnership long after I left, so the library is developing a collection with our digital files, campaign posters, educational materials, and more that will eventually become available to researchers and community members.

While I'm pleased that our relationship with the university libraries eventually took shape, archival documentation need not be so formal to be impactful. There are multiple spaces and methods of archival practice, including artistic productions, notetaking and storytelling, and policymaking that might be documented and organized on social media, in public writings, in cloud folders, and more. Making intentional choices in collectivity about where and how to archive the work can prevent inaccessibility and organizational memory loss.

Relational ontologies invite us to move beyond individualist thinking and disrupt linear, dualistic approaches. Elsa Barkley Brown's analysis is particularly instructive when it comes to how archiving our movement work can support an expansive and relational view of history. Brown (1992) wrote, "History is also everybody talking at once" (p. 297) and invited historians to contemplate how to situate isolated historical narratives in a much broader context. This enables, Brown (1992) offered, a more coalitional and intersectional politics suited to our "asymmetrical world" (p. 307). We might think of archival practices in movement spaces, then, as historical tellings that can facilitate dialogue and coalition-building with an extensive movement landscape and history. Crafting, communicating, and organizing policies, norms, and the educational principles and resources that guide our work can become a sort of living library, a place for movement workers across space and time to turn for guidance, inspiration, and even critique.

I briefly explore these micro-utopic practices not to suggest that they are enough to overcome systemic oppressions, to imply that prefigurative practices will always be tidy and rigid undertakings, or to prescribe fixed solutions for already overburdened organizers, educators, and advocates. Instead, I offer these reorientations in thought and practice as experiments to facilitate collaboration and capacity-building, creating a bit more space between our own ways of being and engaging in political advocacy and the grip of neoliberal individualism. In the context of heightened engagement with burnout and the internal cultures of social justice movement spaces (i.e., Mitchell, 2022), I should emphasize that I'm not suggesting that these micro-utopic, process-oriented practices need supplant the more outward-facing campaign work and social actions in which organizing spaces are invested or that the work should pause until such practices are "perfected." In a necessary refusal of a reductive internal/external binary, I offer micro-utopic practices like those I shared above as adaptive and emergent capacity-building actions that are deeply

integral to facilitating collaboration and implementing the large-scale work in real-time.

Conclusion

The tensions and stuck places in organizing that neoliberalism and Cartesian humanism enable – from lack of support to frustration with overwork – are neither final nor are they individual productions. What I've suggested here is that neoliberalism and the precarities it induces rely on a particular "description of the human" (Wynter, 2003, p. 310) as a rational, individual self. In this ontology, self-care and individual hard work can emerge as feasible solutions for stresses in organizing. I believe it is possible to practice organizing in a relational, emergent way even as neoliberal individualism structures so many parts of our material-discursive world. While I've focused in this article on outlining a theoretical basis for analyzing neoliberalism and its ontological assumptions in organizing, with emerging thoughts on micro-utopic practices, this line of inquiry would benefit from a more robust exploration of what it might look like to organize in alignment with relational ontologies.

One of Cartesian humanism's projects is to simplify ambiguity and institute hierarchies as a mode of congealing power and circumscribing the realm of possibility. Yet, ambiguity still exists, and Cartesian humanism is not totalizing. One such route for navigating this ambiguity and opening the "as-yet-unthought" (Manning, 2016, p. 7) possibilities for being together, I believe, is through focusing our attention on the entanglements of which we are a part, prompting us to attend to capacity-building infrastructure and to dislodge from an ordering and hierarchizing logic that constrains movement and adaptability. This reorientation is a small shift that might support us in finding spaces to exercise the prefigurative project of *living* in the world as we wish it to be and in caring for our entangled pasts-presents-futures in all their capaciousness. "Striped dolphins eat fish with luminous organs that live in the deep scattering layer of the sea. What nourishes them is literally what lights them up inside! Could we be like that?" (Gumbs, 2020, p. 56). Could we, too, nourish our collective capacities for ecstatic, expansive organizing?

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