

MOTHERS RECLAIMING OUR CHILDREN

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, QUOTED IN ANGELA DAVIS, *WOMEN, CULTURE & POLITICS* (1989)

Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC) began to organize in November 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. At the outset, the ROC consisted of only a few mothers and others, women and men, led by its founder and president, Barbara Meredith, and the 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 historic 1992 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 net-

work throughout greater Los Angeles and achieved recognition as an organization devoted to action rather than to commentary.¹

Mothers ROC's mission was "to be seen, heard, and felt in the interest of justice." To achieve this goal, Mothers ROC convened its activism on the dispersed stages of the criminal justice system. The group extended an unconditional invitation to all mothers and others struggling on behalf of their children, and it reached its audience in various ways. The primary method was leafleting public spaces around jails, prisons, police stations, and court-houses to announce the group's existence and purpose. When distributing flyers and business cards, members engaged people in conversation to explain the purpose of Mothers ROC (whose members are known as ROCers). ROCers gave talks and workshops at elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, churches, clubs, and (at the outset, but with decreasing frequency) prisons and jails. They also appeared on regional and local radio and television programs. Using these means, Mothers ROC established a presence at many locations throughout the political geography of the penal system.

ROCers attracted hundreds of mothers to fight on behalf of their own children in the system. Many were already solitarily performing the arduous labor of being on the outside for someone—trying adequately to switch among the many and sometimes conflicting roles required of caregivers, wagedworkers, and justice advocates. Some would attend one meeting and never return; others have persisted, whether their loved one's case lost or won. Often newcomers brought someone to the meeting for moral support—a marriage or other partner, relative, child, or friend from church or neighborhood, and that person also became active. Each weekly gathering averaged twenty-five

women and men. 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 loved ones in custody. Among the tens of thousands awaiting trial or doing time in the juvenile detention camps and centers, and in the county adult jails throughout the Southland, knowledge of Mothers ROC circulated by word of mouth, and a standard part of the message was that the women are willing to help with even apparently hopeless cases.

Every flyer proclaimed the ROC's principle: "We say there's no justice. What are we going to do about it? . . . EDUCATE, ORGANIZE, EMPOWER." Mothers ROC made no judgment about the innocence of those whose families turn to the group for help. Not a service organization, the group helped mothers 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 transformed their caregiving or reproductive labor into activism, which then expanded into the greater project to reclaim all children, regardless of race, age, residence, or alleged crime. Experienced ROCers teamed up with newcomers to call on investigators and attorneys. They researched similar cases, and become familiar with the policies and personalities of prosecutors and judges. In addition, ROCers attended one another's hearings or trials. They also observed courtroom practices in general, monitoring individual officers of the court or state's witnesses believed to promote injustice.² The group's periodic demonstrations outside courthouses and police stations brought public attention to unfair practices. Finally, ROCers sponsored monthly legal work-

shops with attorneys and requested research reports from scholar-activist members to help mothers become familiar with the bewildering details of the system in action.

Although 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 focus 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. A few years into its existence, the group had Black, Brown, Asian American, and white women, and some men. Most participants had loved ones in custody. People came to meetings from all over Los Angeles County, western San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, and northern Orange County, while their loved ones were locked up throughout California.

Mothers ROC consciously identified with 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 was neither spontaneous and naive nor vanguard and dogmatic, but rather, mixing methods and concepts, it exemplifies the type of grassroots organization that "renovates and makes critical already-existing activities" of both action and analysis to build a movement (Gramsci 1971: 330-31).

The material basis for their struggle was apparent: California's deep political-economic restructuring reconfigured the social reproductive landscape, as well as the world of work. The condition of surplus labor falls most heavily on modestly edu-

cated men in the prime of life from Black and other households of color in Los Angeles; such men are also overrepresented among CDC prisoners. Fully 40 percent of state prisoners come from Los Angeles County, and 70 percent from the Southland. What happens in the communities from which prisoners make their involuntary migrations? While the expansion of industrialized punishment in California has a relentless intensity, it is important not to misread the structural as also somehow inevitable. Industrialized punishment produces its own contradictions, as we saw in the conclusion to the account of the CDC's growth.

Mothers ROC's work illuminates contradiction from another cut—that of working women who refuse the state's criminalization and sacrifice of their loved ones dispossessed by deindustrialization. Crucial here are both the state of emergency that communities such as South Central Los Angeles have been living under for more than a generation and its broader historical context. From the mothers' vantage point, we can see how prison expansion, and opposition to it, are part of the long history of African Americans and others whose struggle for liberation in the racial state has never achieved even a fully unfettered capacity to be free *labor*. The development of political responses to legal dilemmas indicates how profoundly incapacitation deepens, rather than solves, social crisis. This chapter is a polemic in the dramatic tradition of slave narratives; it both personalizes and generalizes the morally intolerable (Kent 1972) to highlight objective *and* subjective dimensions of the expansion of punishment and prisons, the demise of the weak welfare state, and the capacity of everyday people to organize and lead themselves.

SITUATING MOTHERS ROC: SOME STRATEGIC
HISTORICAL COMPARISONS

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

MYLES HORTON AND PAOLO FREIRE, *WE MAKE THE ROAD BY WALKING* (1990)

Mothers Reclaiming Our Children is part of a rich history of twentieth-century movements whose systems, organizations, and practices resonate with the Los Angeles grassroots women's critique of social conditions and their approach to social change. The point of the following historical excursions is to show how spatially, sectorally, and temporally far-flung struggles intersect in Mothers ROC and similar grassroots organizations that rise up everywhere. Beyond a formal analytical similarity, the convergence suggests real connections between underlying causes that produce similar outcomes.

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 system in question *and* to troubling hierarchies and unusefully narrow practices in organizations that are the basis of antisystemic movement. I believe such complexity expresses an organic relation between these struggles and the specific context of the crises from which they emerge. Here, I wish to differentiate specificity from a narrow conception of localism or specialization. Thus, by "organic" I mean situated—the quality of being on the ground. It is a material not mystical quality; and what one makes of it can be wonderful or terrible. The way conflict emerges in a social structure is not inevitable, even though it may be understood, in a general sense, 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, and it is my interest here to reconcile the micro with the macro by showing how the drama of crisis on the ground is neither wholly determined by nor remotely autonomous from the larger crisis. I do not wish to ascribe intentions or dimensions to people's actions where evidence indicates otherwise; rather, 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, the group's specific response to crisis was organized, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, around three key factors. These are the embeddedness of African American and other working-class mothers in a world only minimally shut out by home; the problem of organizing the unorganized in the United States according to categories other than singular, partial 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 and the polity legitimizing it.

Black Working-Class Mothers Women whose paid labor is crucial to the household economy and who are judged 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 from women who can ignore such material and ideological constraints (Boris 1989). Such difference in the United States is further hierarchically organized by race (Fields 1990). During the Progressive Era (roughly 1893–1920), 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 (Linda Gordon 1994; Giddings 1984). While immigrant European working-class women ordinarily had to work for wages, 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; Fraser and Gordon 1992). 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 unnecessary or that their mates could ever earn a reliable family wage (Linda Gordon 1994; cf. Dalla Costa and James 1972; W. J. Wilson 1987). In the period, while elite civic activists developed new state agencies to guide the transformation of immigrant women and their families into Americans, and juvenile justice departments initiated a particular repertoire of control-as-reform, the simultaneous proliferation of Jim Crow laws shut out most Black people from political or economic engagement (Mink 1995; Schlossman 1995; Woodward [1955] 2002).

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; Sterling 1984). Efforts centered on life’s everyday details and included lessons in such areas as grooming, liter-

acy, and better housekeeping either for wages or for family. Club women used recognizable household relations to build women's political consciousness. (G. E. Gilmore 1996) The self-help lessons were 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 (Angela 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 (Angela Davis 1981; White 1985), the reality of Jim Crow laws (Sterling 1984; G. E. Gilmore 1996), and the discipline of lynching (Ginzburg [1962] 1988) 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.

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 future of the race as depending 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 1967) of negative contingencies—exemplified by the nation's territorywide, multiscalar accumulation of both Jim Crow laws

and de facto segregation practices in the Progressive era (Du Bois [1935] 1992; Marks 1989; Woods 1998). Most children might learn strictly to labor in whatever niches defined their generation's market enclave (Willis 1977). At the same time, however, the constant reorganization 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 (cf. Omi and Winant 1986).

While the type of organizing club women espoused seems to have fallen 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 political 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 (although not exclusive) victims of lynching and police brutality (Carby 1987; Ware 1992). Similarly, in later years, the Montgomery bus boycott—popularly viewed as a watershed of the post-World War II civil rights movement—gained structure and strength in large part from a church-based women's organization. These women 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 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 (A. D. Morris 1984).

The Problem of Identification Organizing is always constrained by recognition: How do people come actively to identify in and act through a group such that its trajectory surpasses reinforcing characteristics (e.g., identity politics), or protecting of a fixed set of interests (e.g., corporatist politics), and instead extends toward an evolving, purposeful social movement (e.g., real class politics)?³ This question has particular importance when it comes to the age-old puzzle of organizing unorganized workers. U.S. labor history is dominated by work site and occupational movement building, with group boundaries established by employers or by skills (Wial 1993; Johnston 1994; Stone 1981). These boundaries, of course, negatively organize—and even disorganize—people who are excluded, because U.S. work sites and occupations are historically segregated by both gender and race (Cobble 1991, 1994; Milkman 1987; Roediger 1991; Wial 1993).

In a few instances, U.S. labor movements 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 policing and spin control, as well as by firms'

engineer-driven managerialism—some attempts along this way produced surprising results (Dubofsky 1969; Phillip Foner 1970; Wial 1993). When the Communist Party (CPUSA) 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 it 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 to 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 CPUSA 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 6,000 millworkers and miners, in addition to dispossessed (busy or idled) farmers, 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 platforms⁴ (Kelley 1990; Painter 1979; B. M. Wilson 2000). 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 wartime organizing and postwar antiracist activism (C. L. R. James 1980).

Today, Justice for Janitors (Jfj) is an innovative labor movement in which neither work site nor occupation has served as a sufficient organizational structure in the low-wage service industry (Johnston 1994; Erickson et al. 2002). Learning from history, Jfj’s

strategy has been 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 that African Americans and others had painstakingly built under the aegis of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during and after World War II (C. L. R. James 1980). Industry subcontracted maintenance and thereby negated labor’s hard-won work-site-by-work-site agreements.

The ensuing proliferation of small, easily reorganized janitorial service contractors made actual employers moving targets, and traditional forms of wage bargaining thus became impossible to carry out or enforce.⁵ Furthermore, janitors working under the new arrangements, often at less than minimum wage, have not been the same people who by 1980 had fought for and won hourly wages of \$10.00 or more (in 1980 dollars). Thus, in addition to pressing employers for contracts, JfJ’s solution was to organize both the actual market for janitorial services (hotels, for example, rather than contractors) and the potential labor market for janitors. This limits employers’ flexibility, because it is their actual and potential clients who agree to do business only with unionized contractors. The solution has also required 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, the JfJ approach is 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) might expect (Wial 1993; Parker and Rodgers 1995; see also Faue 1990).⁷

Public Mothers The divisions between home and work, private and public, on the stage of capitalist culture seem for many the self-evident, natural limits to particular kinds of conflict. When political conflicts show the holes in those limits, new possibilities for organizing 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 United States have taken their clandestine exploitation public on a number of fronts, combining community-based organizing with frontline 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 (1977–83), Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo defied the presumption 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 (Fisher 1989; Bouvard 1994). The fascists' nightly abductions of 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 one another 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 names 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 (M. E. 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 visibly 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 (Mellibovsky 1997). Betrayed in the early years by state and church officials alike, by military, police, bureaucrats, and priests, the Madres learned to challenge 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 redemocratized Argentina emerged, they did not return to hearth and home but rather expanded their political horizons, shifting their focus to 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 shall see, Mothers ROC emerged in a political-economic climate as hostile as that which formed each group we have briefly examined. ROC's solutions to the problems constituting the daily struggle to reclaim the children drew on the structural features of radical self-help, on the strategies of orga-

nizing on every platform where conflict is enacted, and on the argument that mothers should extend their techniques as mothers beyond the veil of traditional domestic spheres. In a word, they realized the “consciencization” (Freire 1970) of motherhood, such that one need not be a woman or a parent to participate in an action-based critique of vulnerability grounded in, but not bounded by, local conditions.

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.

MOTHERS RECLAIMING OUR CHILDREN 1995 FLYER

Nobody disputes that on November 29, 1991, a Los Angeles Police Department officer 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 the LAPD, he was a gangster run amok. No charges were ever filed in the case.

The killing provoked a grassroots rearrangement of power throughout South Central Los Angeles, producing along the way both the 1992 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.⁸

Two of the dead man's cousins, Gilbert and Jocelyn, and their mother Barbara, initiated the work of figuring out how those most vulnerable to state violence could begin systematically to shield themselves from it. 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 discussion is typical wherever poor people are harassed, 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 that relentlessly stalk the urban working and workless poor (see Greenberg and Schneider 1994; R. W. Gilmore 2002a and b).

In order to persuade as many residents as possible that the death concerned them all, the family formed the George Noyes Justice Committee, which met in the all-purpose room at Imperial Courts to plan ways to fight the wrongful death. To mark the moment further, Barbara, Gilbert, and Jocelyn decided to walk the neighborhood, starting with the three South Central public housing projects, and ask the 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. The dangers of the pilgrimage were many: Gilbert was a well-known gang member who could not pass through 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 housing projects, residents might easily view them as outsiders making trouble in locations intensely surveilled through a number of means, including helicopters, on-site security, caseworkers from income assistance programs, and periodic LAPD raids (Mike Davis 1990).

To reassure residents that she was not an “outside agitator” but rather a grieving aunt, fearful mother, and good sister, Barbara started to hold 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 (see, for example, hooks 1990, chs. 5–6). She married a career military man, lived on bases around the United States, 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 (Soja and Scott 1996). When the old heavy industries (steel, tire, auto, and to some degree oil) cut workers or closed plants and the waterfront mechanized, 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; Soja 1989).

Many women from the "stranded communities" (Jacqueline 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 over four or five years old) might attend one of the sessions, and they eagerly put themselves to the tasks

of doing each other's 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 (see, e.g., Spalter-Roth et al. 1992; Hartmann 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 violent 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 Imperial Courts, the landscape of legitimate work was bleak: 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 nowhere in terms of education and skills (see also Sklar 1995). Barbara forged an alliance among women in the projects in spite of her own outsider status by appealing to a capacity the group achieved through coordinated maternal practices; they made critical the activities of mothering as necessary, social, and consequential by doing, collectively, what they already knew how to do as individuals (Collins 1990).

At the same time, Barbara, Gilbert, and Jocelyn achieved the one-day truce, by persuading the gangs—temporarily—to suture South Central's divisions and shift their everyday capacity to act as extralegal “shadow states” by realigning their practices from small-scale “interstate” rivalries to an areawide alliance.⁹ They walked and talked with people in the three projects and

along the streets between them, emphasizing how everyone could relate to a family who had lost a loved one and everyone could tell a tale of 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's 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 one day's free passage through the streets of South Central.

The men also agreed to a truce in the name of the grieving mothers. They extended their commonsense notion of the gangs as "families" 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.

The two groups—mothers and gangs—quite rapidly developed a process of identification, focused, at the outset, on realizing a common interest—an ordinary 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 action in the context

of their more general interest to struggle against the conditions that required so much organizing to precede such a homely 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 helped secure, 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 followed shortly after 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 it 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 five hundred 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 the brutal treatment too often doled out by the hands of the law (Donner 1990).¹⁰

Throughout the winter of 1991–92, 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 Imperial Courts, where women

from other projects would sometimes 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.

Shortly after 19:30 P.M. on February 16, 1992, just as a Justice Committee fund-raising dance at the Imperial Courts all-purpose room was about to end, the LAPD showed up at the door to arrest Gilbert. They charged him with taking ten dollars during an armed robbery that had 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) changed the city's political mood. Three days of "multicultural riots" (Mike Davis cited in Katz and Smith 1993) produced both new unities and new divisions. The uprising began in the afternoon, after a Simi Valley jury acquitted the four LAPD men who had beaten Rodney King, a motorist who had apparently committed several misdemeanors.¹¹ Millions had viewed the videotape of the beating by an eyewitness, George Holiday, which had been extensively and intensively broadcast for more than a year (R. W. Gilmore 1993; Madhubuti 1993; Gooding-Williams 1993).

Friend and foe widely attributed the truce to the uprising.

However, according to participants and witnesses, a month earlier, on March 29, the peacemakers of the Los Angeles gang worlds met at the independent South Central mosque to sign their historic declaration. Indeed, the riots did not produce the truce; rather, the truce, Mothers Reclaiming Our Children, and the uprising were all expressions of the same objective conditions that characterized relations between the state and stranded Black, Brown, and other poor communities throughout deindustrializing Los Angeles.

Like the trial of the four LAPD officers, Gilbert's also changed venue. But whereas the trial of the former was moved to Simi Valley, where they were more likely to have a jury of their peers (e.g., police or retired military), the state relocated Gilbert's case from Compton—where seating a Black jury is quite easy—to the Long Beach courtroom of an “anti-gang” judge, Marvin Doolittle. 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 his peacemaking achievements, the judge bound the young man 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 cases made it 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 had taken her son away, just as it was the state, at many levels, that had 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, where the white supremacist 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. The ROC 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 eleven months.¹²

The project to “Free Gilbert Jones” also marked the beginning of the formal organization of Mothers ROC. In alliance with a number of other South Central mothers, many of whom had children of all ages 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, Francie Arbol, a Los Angeles activist, met Barbara through the intervention of an LA-based writer 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 the Communist Labor Party, which had organized in several U.S. cities in the 1950s. The African American revolutionary Nelson Peery founded the small party. His consciousness of race and class oppression had developed while he rode the rails as a teenage laborer during the

Great Depression and further evolved while he served in the Pacific Theater during World War II (Peery 1994). The group was renowned in radical Los Angeles circles for grassroots, issue-oriented organizing with nonmembers.

Francie Arbol, daughter of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, had joined the party as a teenager in the 1960s. She had 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 sense of how to get things done. Unafraid to engage in spirited debate, she also carried through on any group-chosen project, regardless of her opinion of it.

When Francie and Barbara sat together to plan the contours of an action-oriented group of mothers, it was in the garage office of the disbanded Communist Labor Party's ongoing community 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 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.

By linking Mothers ROC to the other projects of the ERC, Barbara and Francie started out with amenities others struggle

long to acquire: an office, a telephone, one of the world's oldest copiers, and a convenient meeting place on neutral ground. They announced a regular Wednesday evening meeting beginning in November. 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 and other loved ones' cases; they came because there was someone, at last, with whom they could talk about what concerned and frightened them most.

Most of the women who had so enthusiastically participated in Barbara's mothering sessions down at Imperial Courts did not come, although Mothers ROC's central premise had not changed. Barbara remained consistent in her invocation of collective mothering as the practice from which political action springs. However, the outright politics of the formal organization apparently deterred some, especially given its dedication to confronting the state head on. This aspect seemed dangerous to people who live intensively policed lives. Francie's role discouraged others who, perceiving her as white, would not trust her as a matter of course. And finally some came and left because rumors that communists controlled the new group spread rapidly thanks to the perhaps 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 parent 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. Many disputed the visit's purpose: some said the police were trying to break up the group, and others

maintained they were trying to help a struggling Black woman, known personally to one of them, who did not understand the consequences of her activism.¹³ 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 view, 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 Mothers 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 the ROC's purpose did not preclude any kind of person from joining and being active—as long as they worked toward the goal of justice.

The debates followed an intricate pattern, demonstrating the rich complexities of common sense in this particular time and place (cf. Gramsci 1971; Stuart 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, and prosecutors and other lawyers. Setting communism aside for the moment, the mothers would agree in one voice that their problem was, indeed, violence and systemic injustice. Yet when confronted by the fact of a (former) communist in their midst—even as the Soviet Union was

collapsing—many of the women absolutely embraced the government’s definition of the collective enemy, for whom Francie, a tiny 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 had learned—whether lining up for civil defense drills or studying the geography of “the free world”—informed their current evaluation of possibility and danger. Furthermore, the connection of communism with atheism sat 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 the “communists”—were the new official enemy now (R. W. Gilmore 1993). Even if the policemen represented authentic African American anticommunist fears, rather than the designs of the county prosecutor, the outcome would not change. Others versed in radical traditions spoke up during the agonizing debates, but the heat stayed mainly on Francie, who stalwartly took it. She was not the only apparent Anglo in the group at the time, but the combination of her ascribed race, radical roots, and refusal to yield—plus her blunt confrontational style—kept Francie 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 Equal Rights Congress 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 LA Four cases, became generalized so that the ROC could act quickly and consistently on new cases. Members set up systems of court monitoring and legal workshops. Mothers would attend court sessions, either for the cases of other mothers or randomly to see what was happening to defendants. Over time, this system became a palpable presence in the halls of Southland county courthouses—especially in Los Angeles. Bailiffs, prosecutors, public defenders, and judges began to recognize that, in Bernice's words, "nice Negro ladies with big handbags" were watching and noting. Indeed, some judges ordered the women *not* to write while court was in session. They would scribble a clandestine note or two and then write up or dictate the proceedings afterward. Judges who issued such orders got more, rather than fewer, observers in their courtrooms. Some mothers who had difficulty with the written word would simply pretend to take notes and rely on their substantial memories to reconstruct events at the end of the legal day.

Mothers also monitored relations between defendants and their attorneys—usually public defenders—and began to hold workshops with activist lawyers in order to learn about the best way to work with legal representation. The workshops became primary centers for people to learn about topics such as acting as one's own lawyer; sentence enhancement; and related issues. One

recurring issue was the belief that a private attorney is better than a public defender—the belief is rooted in the commonsense American belief that “you get what you pay for.” The fact that working people including the ROCers “pay” for all the public defenders via taxation is invisible in this schema. However, in the ROC, automatic distrust of public defenders (known on the street as “public pretenders”) gradually gave way to a view of how rapid growth in industrialized punishment produced both overworked public defenders and a concomitant expansion of unscrupulous private lawyers looking to make a sure dollar.¹⁴ This critique further sharpened the ROC’s perception of the crisis as a political question—what should the state be like?—as well as a legal question—how do we correct wrongs in the courtroom?

The shift in location and project—from the meetings at Imperial Courts to the full-fledged Mothers ROC poised to take on the state courts—represented a change in the social position of the women as a group. Nearly all the ROCers worked for wages in the formal economy; and those who did not were disabled (generally by ailments exacerbated by poverty and stress, such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer) or retired. Many noted the bitter irony that in order to become full-time mothers for the first time, they had to lose one or more children to the system. More than half were homeowners living in modest stucco or frame bungalows, or condominiums. They were all keenly conscious that they have something to lose. The structure of Mothers ROC gave them a framework for hope as well as for action, encouraging an expansion of political scope from immediate legal remedies to a wider exposition and assault on the criminal justice system as a whole.

A MOTHER'S PLEA FOR HELP: LAW, SPACE, AND SOLIDARITY

Early on a Thursday morning in 1992, just before that year's long Independence Day Weekend, a dozen officers from the San Bernardino and Los Angeles County Sheriff's Departments and the West Covina Police kicked in Bernice Hatfield's front door. Hearing what sounded like an explosion, followed by footsteps, falling furniture, and shouting, Bernice rushed to the top of the stairs in her modest suburban condominium, and looked down on a vision of terror. Guns drawn, the police stood in the knees-bent, two-hands-on-the-pistol crouch that tells every television viewer that bullets are sure to fly. The officers were calling for the surrender of her seventeen year-old son "Stick," and they hollered at her to put her hands where they could see them. Bernice raised her hands over her head and edged down the stairs, trembling as she asked over and over again "What are you doing here? What do you want?" As it turned out, they wanted to charge Stick with six counts of attempted murder. The officers took the teenager away that morning; and for the next decade, Bernice fought against what in her periodic newsletter, *A Mother's Plea for Help*, she called "the legal kidnapping of my child."

Never a naive woman, Bernice grew up Black and working-class in a postwar southern New England city, living inequality and racism in generally unremarkable ways. Determined not to be poor all her life, she studied hard in school, became a nurse, and worked for twenty years to care for and reassure the sick and suffering. Bernice thought she knew about how the justice system worked. While she did not expect it to be truly unbiased, she did expect that when someone is charged with a crime, there is probably some evidence, whether genuine or bogus. The

“people’s” case against her son consisted of contradictory testimony and there were no injuries, no gun, no motive, and no clear reason for him to have been brought up on charges in the first place. Yet he was charged, and as a gang member.

The powers of and pressures on the principal players in the criminal justice system were augmented by the California Street Terrorism Enhancement and Prevention Act (STEP Act) of 1988, and a host of related laws. California declared war on gangs during the first phase of the prison expansion program in the mid 1980s, and specifically targeted Los Angeles County, where Bernice and her family lived, as the region where new programs would be developed. Sacramento directed local law enforcement agencies to identify all gang members in their jurisdictions so that the state could develop a comprehensive, centralized gang database.

Stick had never before been in custody, but about a year earlier, after he was pulled over for a motor vehicle infraction, his name had been entered into the state’s gang database. In early 1993, after he and his mother rejected a plea bargain offering him six years in the Youth Authority, the prosecutors decided to try him on the six counts. With sentence enhancements, or extra time per charge, due to his gangster status, the state assured him that he faced ninety-one years in prison. Stick, who by then had turned eighteen, decided to accept the bargain, which required him to confess guilt and to waive any rights to an appeal; in the interim, the prosecutor increased the minimum term from six to nineteen years, even though nothing in the case had changed except Stick’s age. Bernice could not legally intervene, because the child had reached majority. In her view, he had been coerced into the confession by those who promised him a lifetime behind bars

if he went to trial and lost. Young and scared, he tried to act hard and worldly. Although Stick was a minor at the time of his arrest, the sentencing judge bound him over to the custody of the California Department of Corrections (CDC) Adult Authority.

The morning the police first took her younger son away, Bernice stepped into a role she could never have imagined herself playing: that of a mother who would reach out to strangers and ask anyone who might listen to help her get her child back. At first she did everything herself, driving fifty miles round-trip to her nursing job each day in addition to traveling forty miles round-trip in the opposite direction for Stick. She visited with her son, met with the public defender, checked up on the private investigator, confronted the prosecutor, interrogated the psychiatric evaluators, and sat stony-faced at the hearings.

Bernice found that while she was struggling to free her child, because his arrest was simply a mistake, the state was working systematically to hold on to him, because his arrest was part of a program to take people “like him” off the streets. For Bernice, the crucial given was that her son had never been in trouble with the law before; for the state, the crucial given was his prior identification as a gang member. For a long time, she refused to engage the state on its own terms, because she thought things should work out fairly: “I believed I had constitutional rights. I mean, I *really* thought I had constitutional rights. But I found out . . . in the courtroom . . . that I am a second-class citizen. The Constitution does not apply to me.”

For African Americans there is nothing new in realizing, once again, second-class citizen status (Du Bois [1935] 1992; Sykes 1988; Fields 1990). But while repetition is part of the deadly drama of living in a racial state, the particular challenge is to

work out the specific realignments of the social structure in a period of rapid change.

Toward the end of one of her long, lonely days, before the confession and plea-bargain deal was struck, Bernice drove toward home from a visit with Stick, frightened that they were losing and unable to understand why. She happened to tune in a radio program about the trial of the LA Four and heard a defendant's mother talking about ROC. While Bernice had thrown herself into her child's case because she is his mother, she had never thought about forming alliances with parents in similar circumstances. Keenly aware that being able to claim her maternal relation to Stick made some difference—court officers and bureaucrats might return a mother's call or respond to one who spends hours waiting on molded plastic seats in anterooms or standing in corridors—Bernice decided to attend a Mothers ROC meeting to see if they could help her.

The ROCers encouraged her to get her story out, to start a chapter over in her part of the county, and to reach out to other mothers like herself in the places where she spent so much time on Stick's behalf. Bernice promptly wrote the first edition of *A Mother's Plea for Help*. She visited a number of copy shops looking for affordable rates and found an establishment run by a man who became sympathetic with her cause after she explained her plight. He agreed to let her use his machines at a discounted rate; and she began to produce her news on brightly colored paper (usually orange, sometimes startling blue) to catch the prospective reader's eye. Combining narrative, scripture, and cartoons, Bernice's two-to-six page broadsides attracted the attention of mothers and others engaged in the unwaged reproductive labor of reclaiming the future by saving their children.

Eventually, Bernice established a regional meeting in the Inland Empire (the area straddling the nexus of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside Counties). Every Saturday, new mothers and others arrived at a Pomona coffeehouse with a broad range of problems; some were trying to stop drug dealers on their streets, others had lost their children to the Department of Youth and Family Services and wanted them back. Men from churches, the Nation of Islam, and several local Black fraternal organizations came to observe and offer help. They also came to let the ROCers know that city and street politics were already under the informal jurisdiction of the old urban coalition organizations such as the NAACP and the churches; thus any new organizing required the blessing of particular power brokers. It quickly became clear that the stages and stakes of the old struggles—churches, city hall, the schools, the civil service—would be helpful but hardly adequate to the new struggle. The implicit caution and challenge from the old civil rights elites, then, came to nothing for two reasons. First, their highly developed localism availed little against a state-organized criminalization project consisting of combined and overlapping jurisdictions. Second, under the weight of the region's ongoing political-economic crisis, the golden age Black-white coalitions were crumbling, while at the same time Chicana/os' achievement of elected and appointed positions signaled certain, if unpredictable, changes to come (cf. Sonenshein 1993).

The ROCers determined to find out about the STEP Act under which Stick had been charged and sentenced. One Saturday afternoon, a group gathered in a California lawyer's library to read up on the law. None of the participants was an attorney, but they had extensive experience in research and writing, and they as-

sumed it would take them an hour or two at most to find the statute and write a statement about it for a flyer. Several hours into their quest, they all realized that the arcana of legal letters starts at the most fundamental level of organization; an outsider could not simply slide her finger down a table of contents or index to find a law. A subcommittee of the group found the law's text the following week by talking their way into a library with an electronic legal database service, and doing electronic subject searches.¹⁵

The STEP Act, and the events leading up to its implementation, made abundantly clear what the mothers feared: the "system" had for years been designating a profile of young persons whose rights and prospects were statutorily different from those of others in their cohort. The Task Force on Youth Gang Violence had stipulated that the region most in need of surveillance and control was in the Southland, and that lack and Brown youths were most likely to be gang members (California State Task Force 1986). While it had stretched the analysis of gang violence to encompass suicidal propensities among white middle-class "Heavy Metal" and "Satanic" gangs, the Task Force absolutely ignored, for instance, the growing skinhead and neo-Nazi gangs concentrated in the Southland (R. W. Gilmore 1993b).

The act's directive compelling local enforcement to identify all gang members in their jurisdictions seemed to the mothers likely to produce indiscriminate listings that would include people based on race and space, and that this, in turn, would transform any kind of youthful stepping out of line into major confrontations with the system. Acting on their new knowledge about the STEP Act, the ROCers decided to expand their stage of activism in order to prepare audiences and future actors for what the drama was really all about. They produced a flyer titled *MOTH-*

ERS WARN YOUR CHILDREN alerting principal caregivers to forbid their dependents to sign papers or allow their pictures to be taken by police on the street. Minors should insist that their parents be called. Adults should politely but firmly demur. The flyers were extremely effective ways to start conversations at bus stops, in the blistering sun at the County Jail parking lot, and outside schools, courthouses, and police stations. Both men and women took the flyers—often promising to duplicate and distribute them at church or work. New people arrived at the Inland Empire meeting, flyer in hand, to learn more about the act.

Bernice had to expand her daily activities. The combined events of Stick's confession and the discovery of the STEP Act increased her labor; in addition to duties of home, job, and the court/jail complex, she now had to learn more about how the act and related laws worked, politically and juridically, and whether anyone had successfully opposed the statutes. Chastened by the afternoon in the lawyer's library, she started spending her free days in the library at the UCLA Law School. By browsing and asking the reference librarian strategic questions, Bernice discovered how to find summaries of recent cases and judgments, how to find the full arguments of those cases, and how to compare the growing stacks of paper to Stick's case.

In the short run, neither new knowledge nor new comrades made Bernice's struggle easier; on the contrary, she realized that she would have to work longer and harder hours as the mother of a kidnapped child. Since Stick's accomplices were never charged with anything, since people not enrolled in gang databases charged with similar offenses receive far lighter sentences, and since young people from different racial, class, or regional positions are often diverted to rehabilitation programs, Bernice set out to make the

case of discriminatory prosecution, augmented by other claims, such as ineffective counsel. Indeed, Bernice perceived what had once been a state-identified chink in its own armor a generation earlier, when the first set of postwar federal anti-gang street crime acts was enacted between 1968 and 1970.¹⁶ At that time, law enforcement hesitated to exercise the statutes because of civil rights concerns—especially in the area of discriminatory prosecution. However, more than two decades of political-economic crisis, coupled with intensive and extensive crime sensationalism in the media (political campaigns, news programming, reality-based shows, movies, and television series), had produced the notion that some people's rights should be restricted based on prior patterns of behavior, which was now perceived as common sense.¹⁷

The intensification of Bernice's anxieties and labors on behalf of her son, coupled with her new occupation helping out and reassuring other mothers in similar predicaments, impeded her nursing. She had always derived great satisfaction from caring for sick people. However, not long before Stick's troubles began, a racist patient in the regional hospital where she had worked for several years had informed a floor supervisor that he did not want the Black nurse to touch him. Bernice decided to find a new job serving a predominately African American clientele, and she loved looking after "my Black patients," most of whom suffered from chronic, and often terminal, ailments. As is the case with so much "women's" work, nursing requires physical, intellectual, and emotional labor (Cobble 1991; Duffy 2005). This, on top of Stick's plight, wore Bernice out—especially emotionally. Ironically, she gave up "women's" paid work in order to do "women's" unpaid work, her inability to nurse enabling her to become a full-time mother. But full-time mothering meant being a "co-mother"

(Tula 1994) with the ROCers, an advocate for her son and all the others—adults and children—caught up in the system.

The web of laws and mandates the ROCers found themselves tangled in was so complex that it seemed to many mothers as though the public defenders who *could* take the time to explain things were spinning tales. Eventually, however, the stories revealed patterns to investigate. Gilda Garcia's testimony exemplified many sociospatial constraints of everyday life for ROCers and their families:

And then she [the public defender] said "The reason the prosecutor can add the extra time is because your son was within 500 feet of a school when he was picked up." My son went to bring his little brother home from school! That's why he was at the school. *La migra* waits by schools to catch people without green cards, and they detain anybody who looks like us. Anybody. We sent our son because he doesn't have a job, so if they stop him we don't lose any money. We're just making it. We can't afford to miss work just because INS needs to look good to . . . I don't mean any offense, but . . . they need to look good for the white people. They don't care about us, that we have jobs. It's all a show. But in the morning, as soon as my husband and I drive away to work, the [city] police are on our street, starting stuff, making our kids mad, telling them they are going to get them. One day I went back because I forgot something, and the police were there, outside of their cars. I asked them "What is wrong? What do you want here?" And this one cop, his name is _____ [knowing laughter in the room], told me, "We're going to get your son," and he called my son names. He told me my son was in a gang. But see, I know he isn't in a gang, because the gang they said he was in is in another neighborhood. My son could not live with us and be in that gang. I have relatives in that gang, who have an auto body shop, and sometimes my son does some

work for them to make a few dollars. But he could never join that gang, because of where we live. Everyone knows that.

As the newcomers like Gilda shared their stories, and began to help each other on cases, Bernice began to understand why she had been so perplexed. While there had been no doubt in her mind that she and Stick were up against a *system*, it became clearer and clearer how the system specifically targeted children like hers, and Gilda's, and Barbara's. She had imagined the criminal justice system was on the other side of a fixed line of law, rather than that the law had moved to include her and her family in its legal and social space.

California's expanding criminal justice system overlaid the state's restructuring landscape with new prisons, new laws targeting people in specific areas, new mandates for law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges; these territorial and discursive regions constituted the system's political geography that the mothers were trying to find their way through. Their techniques of mothering, in and as Mothers ROC, extended past the limits of household, kinship, and neighborhood, to embrace the political project to reclaim children of all ages whose mothers were losing them, at a net rate of fifty-five statewide per business day, into the prison system.

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, *THE LONDON HANGED* (1992)

Prayer framed every Mothers ROC meeting. At the beginning and end of each session, the group held hands in a circle and to

ask for protection and guidance. The women who led the prayers had a gift for preaching. Their invocations set and summarized the seemingly endless agenda of reclaiming the children within a material context of spiritual hope realized through human action. Prayer helped span the visible and invisible social distances among people for whom, in most cases, organized religion was a vital aspect of life. Prayer also figured the power of attentive listening for group-building. During prayer, anyone in the group might comment affirmatively on the leader's devotional trajectory, and such encouragement of the speaker encouraged the collectivity, as one and then several voices would rise, lifting the speaker's higher. And finally, by emphasizing the difficulty and urgency of the situation that has brought them together, prayer renewed and strengthened the mothers' provisional unity. Individual differences, which occasionally produce incidents, did not need to become persistent organizational impediments—in a house of worship or in the ROC.

The group meditation on power and powerlessness established the scene in which mothers are able to identify with one another in a fast-changing world. In 1994, the FBI recorded 11,500,000 arrests by federal, state and local law enforcement. In 1995, the number increased to 14,500,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract*, 1995, 1996). Arrest and incarceration are common in the United States, 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 of itself produce any kind of strong social identification. In the ROC and elsewhere, the similarity of mothers' stories could produce a sense of commonalty, but without guarantees that such a sensibility might serve as the basis for collective action. Within a

social order of wide and deep inequality—most forcefully expressed as racial inequality—the mothers were cautious, because 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 had charged Harry Daye with a third-strike felony rather than a petty theft misdemeanor. Suddenly, the African American man faced a mandatory minimum sentence of twenty-five 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 had to pause because of the breathtaking anxiety of revealing seemingly unbelievable adverse family circumstances to strangers. However, the roomful of women recognized the Dayes’ 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 twenty-five years to life without the possibility of parole, known on the street more briefly as “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 included 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"—a charge that can be treated as either a misdemeanor or a felony. Three strikes and other minimum-mandatory-sentence laws, conventionally portrayed to work with a machinelike disregard for individual circumstance, actually explicitly allow prosecutors and judges to use discretion "in the furtherance of justice." However, throughout California—especially in the southern counties that produce most prisoners—the practice of prosecutorial or judicial discretion in favor of second or third "strike" defendants was throughout the 1990s so rare as to be newsworthy (see, e.g., 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?¹⁸ 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 of poverty, powerlessness, and vulnerability before the law.

In the year or so before Pearl Daye brought her case to ROC, Latino (mostly Chicano and Mexicano) prisoners surpassed African Americans as the largest group in absolute numbers in CDC custody.¹⁹ The unevenness in outcome for people of color lies in both patterns of policing and the offense with which defendants are charged. For example, in Los Angeles County, white defendants would be far more likely to have charges reduced from felonies to misdemeanors or dropped completely, while people of color are more likely to have the harshest possible charge leveled against them (Schiraldi and Godfrey 1994; see also Nasar 1994). Both federal and California laws allow radically different treatment of people who have done essentially the same thing. Such police, prosecutorial, and judicial capacity—which, since its introduction in the early 1980s, has remained fundamentally impervious to challenges based on “equal protection” and other constitutional principles—provides both the means and the encouragement for application of substantively different rules and punishments to various kinds of defendants (see, e.g., Butler 1995).

It is not surprising, then, that the ROCers had a hard time developing a summary of how the law discriminates against and among those who are most vulnerable to the system. The law’s ability to wobble made routinely unequal punishments possible. At the same time, the wobble made developing a commonsense 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 operated 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 was 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 away for "twenty-five to . . . without."

Leticia heard about the ROC from her husband, who had learned about it 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 welcome. 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 1,200 new pieces of criminal legislation to Brown as well as Black defendants. The night of Pearl Daye's first visit, 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, which the closing prayer emphasized as the session's unfinished business. Finally, one of the women proposed a 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 the three strikes act, 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, because it provided a way for the women to recognize one another through the extension of prosecutorial practices without ignoring African Americans' indisputable experience of the new laws' most intensive application.

Not long after discovery of the Black/white law solution, a local power broker came calling on the ROC. The African American man, who had made a small fortune running secured (locked-down) drug rehabilitation units for the state, wanted the ROC's blessing to build a private prison (owned by him) in the neighborhood where the CDC would send selected prisoners to serve the final year of their sentences. He assured the women that the prison would be run in accordance with community wishes, since the city would not grant a conditional use permit for the location without community approval. For many ROCers, this visit crystallized the dynamic contradiction in the system they had

taken on. If the ROC was right, then the prison was unnecessary. If the prison came in, accompanied by “jobs” then part of the ROC’s critique—poverty—would seem to have been addressed by expanding the specific object of the ROC’s opposition—cages.

As the carceral entrepreneur—himself an ex-prisoner—explained how much good the prison would bring to South Central, the ROCers listened closely. Then, in an orderly show of political passion, each one told him why, from her perspective, the ROC would never endorse the facility. His claim that somehow the community could control the inner workings of a prison because of its location struck them as ludicrous; they had learned that distance is not simply measured in miles, and that the prison would not be a neighborhood or community facility, but rather a state incapacitation facility run according to state rules. His promise that perhaps their own children might be in the prison elicited, at first, an emotional moment of hope on the part of some women, who drove fifteen-year-old cars four hundred miles round-trip on Saturdays to see their sons. But the record of failures in many of the campaigns to have children moved closer to their families indicated that the people in the proposed South Central prison would not likely come from the area. The ROC told the entrepreneur, over and over, that they would not remedy the disappearance of jobs at GM, Firestone, and Kaiser by putting half the population into prisons so the other half could make money watching them. They sent him on his way, somewhat bruised by their blunt words.

The visit provoked the members to ask themselves what else they should be doing to stop the prison from going up in South Central. They knew that the prison would go up somewhere—the power broker had assured them of that—and so protesting at

the local level would not solve the problem. Clearly, the ROC had to expand its activities to an adequate scale. At the next meeting, they decided to take on the brutal three strikes law in order to build a statewide coalition of people who would be likely to help fight the expansion of prisons as California's all-purpose solution to social problems involving the poor. That project, inaugurated in January 1996, built slowly over a year, eventually culminating in a "Three Strikes Awareness Month" during which teach-ins, radio and television appearances, and leafleting outside courthouses raised consciousness of the legislation's effect. Although the scale of activity grew, so did uneasinesses and antagonisms as the ROC entered a new organizational phase, in which the place where it had begun life in the ERC's office might remain the symbolic, but not necessarily the political, center of the group.

YOU CAN'T MAKE ANY MONEY HOLDING BAKE SALES:

NEW SITUATIONS, NEW STRATEGIES

While Mothers Reclaiming our Children started off with the kinds of amenities—office, telephone, fax, copier—that most fledgling grassroots groups lack, the meager initial advantage created the basis for future needs. In particular, the organization's capacity to plan outreach and strategy around the three strikes law rested on the fact that they had a place, could make and receive telephone calls, produce flyers, and get communiqués to and from other concerned activists—including a few inside key state offices—printed reasonably rapidly. To some ROCers, however, this flurry of activity—while important—threatened the Mothers' core purpose and constituency both by diverting material resources and by turning so much attention toward one category of defendant/prisoner.

In order to achieve stability in the newest crisis, ROCers from both tendencies agreed to formalize as a not-for-profit organization. Across the divide, the activists agreed that a mission statement would be an objective standard against which all collective undertakings could be measured, and they also agreed that current and future projects would require substantial income. The agreements produced sustained disagreement as factions tried to fashion mission statements commensurate with what they thought the group should become. The debate shifted a good deal of everyday work from the politics of organizing to the politics of organization. In other words, reworking themselves into an institution—with written rules, a governing board, and detailed expenditures—became, for a while, *the* ROC activity.

The astonishing suppleness of the ROC's earlier days gave way in this period to slower and more deliberate methods; it was as if the structural imperative everyone wished to satisfy ruled out a future in which the women and men could depend on ad hoc summonings of sense, experience, and spirit to work through problems and differences. What they hoped to gain in return for the sacrifice of spontaneity was the sturdiness of reproducibility: not an ad hoc future, but a predictable one. Of course, to guarantee a future meant to become legitimate, to seek shelter in one corner of the state while doing battle in many others. But being so sheltered also meant getting "legal"—following rules, no less than laws, with the specter of noncompliance standing in as a shadow policeman. Poverty and underdevelopment persist because the way out is across the very infrastructured barriers that make it possible to identify poor regions, or neighborhoods, or races, or genders, in the first place; being locked in and locked out are two sides of the same coin. A good deal of the early excite-

ment at the prospect of becoming a registered not-for-profit organization centered on the hopeful misunderstanding that achieving tax-exempt status under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code was in itself a development plan—as though eligibility for certain kinds of money were a fiscally magnetic force. Those with different understandings—from prior experience or present study—began to think quite practically about fund sources, given the ROC’s potential range of not-for-profit practices. Grants? Speaker fees? Services? T-shirts?

A consultant who specialized in helping grassroots groups incorporate encouraged the group to think creatively, while cautioning that they could not make any significant money from holding bake sales. The reminder that neighborly voluntarism could not guarantee the ROC’s future forced everyone to think about the array of funding options that might realistically be forthcoming. In other words, whenever the work focused on budget building—the “business” of legally legitimate activism—discussions gravitated toward the cooperative self-help mode that gave the ROC its early local appeal and strength, setting aside more expansive political strategies the three strikes faction struggled to realize.

Polled separately and informally, every ROCer wanted to save everybody caught up in the criminal justice system, but polled collectively and formally, most said their organizational attention ought to concentrate on youth. By the mid 1990s, organizing on behalf of young people “at risk” had gained cachet among the kinds of small regional foundations from which the ROC might get seed money. At the same time, governmental agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Justice, dangled money for community-based organizations in cities that agreed to trade “weeds” (crimi-

nalizable adults or juveniles) to law enforcement for “seeds” (grants).²⁰ Deindustrialization and crumbling welfare state institutions combined to create emergencies that were addressed by the official sector—if at all—either through the expanding system of criminalization or, in a smaller way (at least when measured by expenditure per youth, if not in absolute numbers) through the interventions of not-for-profit organizations fueled by pre- or post-tax dollars. the ROC did not predicate its future on what was fundable. However, it incorporated at a time when the public abandonment of young people applied increased pressures throughout the quasi-private caring community. Therefore, to join that community “officially” meant taking on that pressure and, as a result, “naturally” taking up that work.

Although popular, the campaign to overturn the three strikes law had less natural appeal than saving kids among those most intent on establishing the ROC’s formal structure. The arduous work of coalition building—any campaign’s first step—requires constant deal making and compromise, even as the character of the struggle is redefined in the practice of producing consent. Or, as the singer-activist Bernice Johnson Reagon liked to put it: “If you’re in a coalition and you’re comfortable, you’re not in . . . a coalition” (Reagon 1983) Since the ROC was in process of defining itself, negotiating externally seemed precisely to threaten the stability and autonomy that members sought to solidify internally.

The strain of give-and-take should have strengthened the core, as it had in the past, particularly because the ROC was the undisputed force behind the new, slowly coalescing, anti-three strikes movement. In a way, the challenge did prove to be strengthening, but not in anticipated or previously experienced ways. At the end of the day, the Mothers rolled down as two

boulders: the new, incorporated, youth-oriented ROC; and the heart of an emerging statewide organization (which itself incorporated after two years of struggle) called Families to Amend California's Three Strikes (FACTS).

In the scramble to institutionalize an identity—to secure a reliable, reproducible, public face—the stresses and strains sometimes degenerated into personality conflicts. Accusations of disrespect flew furiously, and it was fairly common during meetings for people to step outside, caucus in the driveway, and return with hardened faces and steely glares. As happened in the early days around the communist scare, some police made informal, friendly suggestions to ROCers about how they could enhance their legitimacy by distancing themselves from extremists.

What constituted extremism? For the police, extremism meant any willingness to face off with (and mouth off at) authority, particularly uniformed authority. But within the group's logic, extremism seemed also to mean any combination of ambition and compromise. Thus, each side saw the other as extreme. The anti-three strikes contingent denounced as "unwilling to do anything" those who emphasized conserving identity through the articles of incorporation and the local, reproducible, repetitive work that would come from success in the endeavor. The latter group, in turn, shook their heads and wagged their tongues at the anti-three strikes faction's seemingly impossible scheme to implant family-based opposition to draconian laws and the media-enhanced fears that produced them into the vastness of California.

While those working on the anti-three strikes campaign initially strove to form a coalition of already existing organizations, the outreach that generated the most stable chapters around California used the ROC methods. It should not be surprising to re-

alize that people who drive long distances to see loved ones will make small talk in parking lots and discover an identity in their immediate purpose, which then might be amplified in open-ended organizing and advocacy. What is surprising, perhaps, is that the temporary camaraderie of those emotional encounters became the basis for trust enabling the newly formed collectives of people with modest resources, mostly women, to do things on a less-than-modest scale. They learned to make plans long distance, use library email capacities, devise agendas, collect signatures on petitions, and eventually come together, lobby elected officials, hold rallies in Sacramento, and, within two years, form a new entity—this time a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization with an expressly, if narrowly, political purpose.

While FACTS was amassing membership around the state—including many among the (by 1998) more than 50,000 prisoners in the CDC's custody on second or third strikes—the ROC moved office twice. The first time was uptown, across the freeway, out of South Central, to Wilshire Boulevard. Fancy as the address sounds, the location is one where a number of low-budget not-for-profits have concentrated in buildings once the exclusive domain of high-wage service providers such as law and accounting firms. Mid Wilshire, for the moment, was a remnant of the old space economy, with beautiful art deco buildings decaying in capital limbo before their rediscovery by the next round of investment.

Although the ROC meetings continued every Wednesday at the original place, the relocation of the office, while only a short distance away, severely disrupted the group's cohesiveness. In retrospect, it seems that the layers of formalities—becoming a 501(c)(3) organization and settling into a businesslike office—in-vigorated a few while alienating many. People just didn't go

there. Barbara Meredith, who continued as president throughout the transition, found the new setup discouraging after a while. The last thing she ever wanted to do was sit alone in a big office waiting for something to happen. What happened was that energy drained from the ROC; some people drifted away, while others, including Francie Arbol, transferred most of their activism to building FACTS.

With her son Gilbert finally released from prison, Barbara Meredith decided that her daily work ought reach back to those among whom she had done her earliest organizing—the young people (parents as well as kids) at Imperial Courts, whom she saw as tomorrow’s strikers, especially given the increased use of zero tolerance and police in public schools and the increasingly common resort to lawmaking and enforcement, rather than informal sanctions, when young people acted out. After she and Gilbert persuaded the Housing Authority to grant them an apartment for on-site activism, Barbara Meredith closed down the Wilshire office and opened the new one a hundred blocks south, where they had walked the streets nearly ten years earlier to accomplish the one-day truce. And while, by day, Gilbert worked for a state senator, he worked around-the-clock to maintain the gang truce in honor of his dead cousin and the many men and women serving long sentences, as he had done.

FROM THE CRISIS OF PLACE TO THE POLITICS OF SPACE

Arrest is the political art of individualizing disorder.

ALLEN FELDMAN, *FORMATIONS OF VIOLENCE* (1991)

For millions of people in the United States each year, the individual nature of arrest produces fragmentation rather than con-

nection, because 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 specific confrontation between the individual and law enforcement. The larger disorder is then distorted to reflect only a portion of social fragilities, and measured, like unemployment, as though its changing rate in a society were a force of nature (see, e.g., Greenwood et al. 1994; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985). ROCers gradually but decisively refused to be isolated and began to develop oppositional political arts centered on creating an order different from the one built by the state out of more and bigger prisons. They arrived at their art through critical action. Action, crucially, includes the difficult work of identification—which entails production, not discovery, of a “suture or positioning” (Stuart Hall 1990). By enlivening African American practices of social mothering, the ROCers engaged a broadening community in their concern for the circumstances and fate of prisoners. That social opening provided avenues for all kinds of mothers (and others) to join in the work, because the enormous labor confronting each mother tended to encourage all of them 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 commonsense invocation of mothering as collective action made possible the group’s integration of mothers with similar or quite different maternalist assumptions (Kaplan 1982; Collins 1990; see also Traugott 1995). In other words, techniques developed over generations on behalf of Black children and families within terror-demarkated, racially defined enclaves provided contemporary means to choreograph interracial political solidarity among all kinds of caregivers losing their loved

ones into the prison system. These mothers and others identified one another in the tight public spaces between their socially segregated residential living places and the unitized carceral quarters in which their loved ones are caged. Some were shy about jumping into the process, while others came to the ROC for help on their individual cases only; but all who persisted practiced the “each one teach one” approach.²¹

The process of integrating different kinds of mothers and others into the ROC involved extensive outreach designed to permeate the social organization of space. These projects also caught people in the “betweens” of segregated lives: at work, for example, or on the bus. Like the Justice for Janitors Los Angeles crusade, however, this approach raised a more general problem of identification. The ROCers easily recognized one another in the spaces of the criminal justice system. Outside those areas, how do people resemble each other? If we are not all Black, and if all activists are not mothers, and if all prisoners are not (minor) children, then who are we? Poor people who work. As a community of purpose, Mothers ROC acted 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 followed that outreach should target working poor people and their youth. Class, then, while the context for this analysis and action, cannot displace or subsume the changing role and definitions of race: poor people of color have the most loved ones in prison.

As a matter of fact, the primacy of class is thoroughly gendered: women who work to support their families and to free their loved ones encounter one another as laborers with similar triple workdays—job, home, justice. Moreover, mothers who re-

ject 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 the declining welfare state and the perils of reproductive labor (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Fortunati 1995; Quick 1992).²² The communist organizational and analytical influences in the ROC kept these complicated interrelated issues in the foreground of activism. In the context of shared opposition, the activists "discovered" (Kaplan 1982)—which is to say, created—shared values; in turn, that collective work produced community solidarity, or political integration, enabling further action. Solidarity increased with increased knowledge about the complexity of how power blocs have built the new state by building prisons. Thus an individual police precinct house no longer loomed as the total presence of the state, shrinking back toward its real position—the neighborhood outpost of what both the ROCers and FACTS characterized as a military occupation.²³ If it takes a village to raise a child, it certainly takes a movement to undo an occupation. As Mothers ROC went deep and FACTS went broad, both sought to immerse themselves in other communities of activism, reaching out nationally and internationally to similar organizations.²⁴ Such motion then and now heightens the potential for connections between women struggling against prison expansion and women throughout the global workforce who struggle daily against the actual processes and effects of worldwide structural adjustments.²⁵

Mothers ROC critically used 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 required mothers of prisoners to live lives of high visibility; ROCers turned that visibility to a politically charged presence, voice, and movement against injustice, such that their activism became 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 frontline relation to the state was not as a petitioner for a share in the social wage but rather as an opponent of the state's changing 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 was not a defense of traditional domesticity as a separate sphere; rather, it represented political activation around rising awareness of the specific ways that the contemporary working-class household is a site saturated by the neoliberal racial state.

Mothers Reclaiming Our Children has evolved from a self-help group that formed in response to a crisis of place—a police murder in South Central Los Angeles—into a pair of political organizations trying to build a powerful movement across the spaces of domestic militarism.

A small, poor, multiracial group of working-class people, mostly prisoners' mothers, mobilized in the interstices of the officially abandoned, heavily policed, declining welfare state. They came forward in the first instance because they could not let their children go. They remained at the fore, in the spaces created by intensified imprisonment of their loved ones, because they encountered many mothers and others in the same locations eager to join in the reclamation project. And they pushed further, because from those breaches they saw and tried now to occupy positions from which collectively to challenge their political, eco-

conomic, and cultural de-development brought about by the individualized involuntary migration of urban “surplus population,” and the potential values that go with that population, into rural prisons. For the ROC and FACTS successfully to oppose the disposal of their loved ones, they organized to challenge the fullest possible reach of state (and civilian) powers arrayed against them. Working through cases, they built alliances of and as multiracial groups that create and sustain solid centers of activism throughout and across the “nested scales” (Smith 1992) of the rising prison state. Thus both groups demonstrate the possibilities and the urgent difficulties of organizing across the many boundaries that rationalize and reinforce apartheid America. Indeed, their work might well exemplify what utopia is these days—social perfectibility recognizable in something as modest as people getting on a bus.