



To Protest for Black Life during the Pandemic: Resistance and Freedom in a Settler State

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Abstract

This article reflects on the global uprisings in support of Black life during the early pandemic. The focus is on what the protests reveal about Black resistance to the nation-building project of Canada. Protests during this period are understood here to have included taking to the streets, practicing care, and calling for abolition. Drawing on critical race theory and Black Studies, especially Black feminism, the author claims these forms of protest condemned Black dispossession under Canadian laws, while they simultaneously exceeded Canada's jurisdiction. In other words, the protests can be understood ambivalently, as occurring under and responding to, but not being of, domination. They refashioned the self and the collective, expressing transient freedom from domination and partial redress, even as settler colonial laws would continue to suppress Black and other subaltern peoples. The article navigates such insights through works by Dionne Brand, Saidiya Hartman, and Katherine McKittrick, among others.

Keywords: critical race theory, Black feminism, abolition, ethic of care, Black presence

Résumé

Cet article se penche sur les soulèvements populaires – de par le monde – qui visaient le soutien de la vie des Noir.e.s dans les premiers mois de la pandémie. L'accent est mis sur ce que ces manifestations révèlent quant à la résistance des Noir.e.s face au projet d'édification de l'état-nation canadien. Les protestations au cours de cette période sont comprises ici comme incluant des manifestations dans les rues, des pratiques du *care* et des appels à l'abolition. S'appuyant sur la théorie critique de la race et les *Black studies*, en particulier le féminisme noir, l'auteur affirme que ces formes de protestations condamnaient la dépossession des Noir.e.s en vertu des lois canadiennes, tout en dépassant la juridiction du Canada. En

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d'autres termes, les manifestations peuvent être comprises d'une manière ambivalente, soit qu'elles se produisent sous la domination tout en y répondant, mais n'en faisant pas partie. Ces protestations ont refaçonné le soi et le collectif, exprimant une liberté passagère par rapport à la domination et une réparation partielle, alors même que les lois coloniales continuaient à réprimer les Noirs et les autres peuples subalternes. L'article explore ces idées à travers les travaux de Dionne Brand, Saidiya Hartman et Katherine McKittrick, entre autres.

Mots-clés: pandémie, théorie critique de la race, féminisme noir, manifestation, abolition, éthique du *care*, présence noire

Everything is up in the air, all narratives for the moment have been blown open – the statues are falling – all the metrics are off, if only briefly.

— Dionne Brand¹

When George Floyd was killed, and days later Regis Korchinski-Paquet died during an altercation with police, I marched in the first protest for Black life in Toronto since the pandemic began. Media narratives of the uprisings in 2020 do not often mention Korchinski-Paquet, a Black, Ukrainian, and Indigenous woman whose death led to protests across Canada. I called my parents to ask whether I should join the march because I would miss a family gathering afterward to minimize the risks of spreading the virus. We considered the risks to me as well, and decided I would march for our family.

My father added that the protest would occur on the date of the annual African Liberation Day march, which he helped organize in his youth. African Liberation Day unites people across continents in marches for freedom. It can be traced to a 1958 conference that Kwame Nkrumah convened to gather African leaders during anticolonial struggles. The global marches began in the 1970s, originally moving through cities of the Caribbean and North America. Describing the event in 1972, the Guyanese intellectual Walter Rodney proclaimed: “when the enemy has created a system of production and a system of exploitation which rests upon our physical presence in the Americas, in Europe, and in Africa, we will use that dispersed presence to mount a tremendous international campaign.”²

Rodney's vision of liberation through Black presence was shared across generations, with marches having preceded him and having never ceased, mounting recently with the Movement for Black Lives. These facts resonated with me during the march to demand “Justice for Regis!,” while millions of people everywhere took to the streets. The procession was an inheritance of solidarity across history and places of the world. It also defied prohibitions against gathering during the early pandemic, meaning there was a risk not only of illness, but of arrest. The march

¹ Dionne Brand, “On Narrative, Reckoning and the Calculus of Living and Dying,” *Toronto Star*, July 4, 2020.

² “The Meaning of African Liberation Day: Walter Rodney Speaks in San Francisco (1972),” Past and Future Present(s), accessed January 15, 2023, <https://pastandfuturepresents.blogspot.com/2018/12/the-meaning-of-african-liberation-day.html>.

thus channelled a spirit of shared risk that Black people and compatriots withstand to manifest resistance.³

In fact, that spring, COVID-19 began to mark Black bodies disproportionately in Canada and globally. The distributive effects of illness on Black peoples did not arise from the marches, but from international and domestic racism that has extended from slavery and colonization until present, taking forms such as inaccessible health care, inadequate housing, and precarious labour.

This article reflects on the protests at the beginning of the pandemic that swelled into a chorus against all such forms of anti-Black racism. My focus will be on what the protests reveal about the nature of Black resistance in the Canadian state. Given that the protests here were transnational, that they condemned state structures that oppress Black and other subaltern peoples, and that they defied pandemic controls, how might we understand the protests in relation to the nation-building project of Canada?

Thinking with Rodney, I claim the protests opposed Canada's repressive laws and assertions of sovereignty, while they also *exceeded* Canada's jurisdiction to speak the law.⁴ In other words, the protests can be understood ambivalently, as occurring within and responding to, but not being of, the Canadian state.⁵ They expressed momentary relief that defied state jurisdiction, even as settler colonial laws would continue to suppress Black life in the "incomplete project of freedom."⁶

In suggesting this, I am inspired by strands of Black feminist thought that I explore throughout this article, notably Saidiya Hartman's concept of "transient zones of freedom," which she used to describe how enslaved persons transgressed the legal regime of slavery in the nineteenth century United States.⁷ Freedom could be glimpsed, Hartman implies, in ordinary things that enslaved persons did to refuse subordination, such as eschewing a command, gathering covertly to hold dances, stealing away to see a loved one....⁸ These clandestine practices opposed the laws of slavery and state jurisdiction to enact them. While responding to domination, Hartman explains that everyday practices of resistance to slavery also anticipated freedom from domination in moments (of dance, song, wandering, being with family...), as enslaved persons refashioned themselves.⁹

³ Christina Sharpe in Nataleah Hunter-Young and Sarah Riley Case, "Thoughts of Liberation," *Canadian Art*, June 17, 2020.

⁴ Shiri Pasternak, "Jurisdiction," in *The Routledge Handbook of Law and Society*, ed. Mariana Valverde, Prabha Kotiswaran, Eve Darian-Smith, and Kamari Maxine Clarke (London: Routledge, 2021), chap. 36.

⁵ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (London: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

⁶ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14, 4.

⁷ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 50.

⁸ See also, on "everyday transgressions" from slavery until today: Adelle Blackett, *Everyday Transgressions: Domestic Workers' Transnational Challenge to International Labour Law* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019). See on "refusals" in the context of Kanien'kehá:ka sovereignty: Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁹ Hartman, *Scenes*, 50.

Self-refashioning in this sense should not be confused with the propertied liberal man, whose agency reflects Eurocentric ways of life based on the dispossession of non-white and poor peoples. Practices of resistance to slavery could gesture to freedom simply because Black lives may be overwhelmed by force, but “we are not *only* known to ourselves and to each other *by* that force.”¹⁰

Being attentive to transient freedom helps to appreciate the resonance of the protests for Black life that rose to prominence during the early pandemic in terms of settler colonial law and jurisdiction. In what follows, I describe how these protests opposed systemic anti-Black racism that Canadian laws sustain, and simultaneously exceeded the jurisdiction that Canada asserts over life and death. Crucially, I show that the protests, while unique to the early pandemic, remembered and enlivened Black radical traditions that operate offside state regulation:¹¹ fugitive practices under slavery and the African Liberation Day march are two examples.

To explore these reflections, this article engages with prose by Dionne Brand in her newspaper opinion, *On Narrative, Reckoning and the Calculus of Living and Dying*. As the introductory quote to this article illustrates, Brand published her piece at the peak of the uprisings. She wrote, while living in Canada, about how the pandemic exposes structural anti-Black racism. She asked—as statues toppled—if the protests might be transformative. Beginning each section of this article with her prose invokes the spirit of that period, which has passed, and I therefore seek freedom in the word.¹² Returning to narration throughout is a praxis, which for me draws on critical race theory and Black Studies, especially Black feminism, to explore how Black and allied communities resist and exceed positive law.

The first part of this article proposes that taking to the streets across Canada expressed transient freedom, extending Hartman’s concept to the act of Black presence in place and space. I anticipated this claim when I invoked Rodney’s words about presence, although I rely in this section on Katherine McKittrick who suggests that Black presence may enact alternate geographies from the Canadian nation.¹³ I would add that these geographies are oppositional and include zones of freedom, in this case from the disproportionate policing of Black bodies that can be traced to slavery.

The second part moves on from the marches to consider the protests for Black life as including everyday practices of care wherever these were needed: caring for persons experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, and labour precarity as well as care among marchers. These practices of care were momentarily freeing because they not only opposed structural inequalities in Canada’s provision of social services through the administrative state, but realized an ethic of care that Black feminists have long nurtured among community.

¹⁰ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 16; Hartman, *Scenes*, 55–56.

¹¹ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023, 2nd ed., 2000).

¹² See Bedour Alagraa, “Homo Narrans and the Science of the Word: Toward a Caribbean Radical Imagination,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2018): 164–81.

¹³ E.g., Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 91–119.

The last part of the article explores abolition, which is a political movement that instantiates a Black feminist ethic of care and a demand that swept protests of the early pandemic. Calls for abolition were a discursive practice that opposed subordination under Canadian laws, while they also channeled movements to abolish slavery, colonialism and their afterlives—movements that have persisted since before modern state constitutions including Canada's. Calls for abolition therefore were, and still are, freeing, as they revitalize(d) Black radical traditions that seek to transform human relations through redress.

Taking Back the Streets

We will begin by letting Dionne Brand's words transport us to the early pandemic:

I have spent my days thinking about calculus and narrative and reckoning. I have spent them tuned to the stilled and heightened frequencies of everyday life. I've spent my days shadowboxing the radio and mainstream print media. I've spent them marveling at the courage, the foresight, and the astonishing brilliance of people, so many of them young, who are taking to the streets....

I know, as many do, that I've been living a pandemic all my life; it is structural rather than viral; it is the global state of emergency of antiblackness. What the COVID-19 pandemic has done is expose even further the endoskeleton of the world.

... And it is no surprise that police and policing come into the frame. And it is no surprise that they must demonstrate state power, and it is no surprise on whom. The x-ray that is the novel coronavirus exposes once again the bare bones of the social structure in which for Black and Indigenous people governance equals policing. Governance as violence.¹⁴

These words help to remember that when the pandemic began the media was consumed by updates about the spread. It was not long before images of Black death became inescapable. Black people and allies rose amid this. There were the public killings and the centuries of racial oppression. A structural pandemic, Brand calls antiblackness, that consolidates in the body of each Black person abused by law enforcement.

I have said before that the processions for Black life demanded a reckoning with policing and they simultaneously prefigured freedom by exceeding Canada's jurisdiction through presence. To arrive at how marchers transformed the streets in these ways, this section principally traces legal processes of racialization that have subjected Black peoples to surveillance and discipline across the country, which assertions of Black presence during the pandemic refused by taking to the streets.

The increasing publicization of books on anti-Black racism in Canada before and since the pandemic—such as *Policing Black Lives* and *The Skin We're In*—has helped to dispel the myth of Canada as a safe haven for Black people.¹⁵ These books

¹⁴ Brand, "On Narrative."

¹⁵ Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Toronto: Fernwood Publishing, 2017); Desmond Cole, *The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power* (Toronto: Double Day Canada, 2020).

affirmed the personal narratives, scholarly accounts, and reports that have long documented the disproportionate criminalization and killing of Black people by Canadian law enforcement. Such conditions are neither justified nor inevitable, although, as Dionne Brand expresses, they are unsurprising. Rather, the policing of Black life today reinscribes structural relations that can be traced to slavery and colonialism which are foundational to Canadian laws and statehood.

Katherine McKittrick's work on race, space and decolonial thinking helps to understand these continuities between past and present, "slavery, postslavery and black dispossession" in Canada, including the consistent policing of Black bodies.¹⁶ She traces Black dispossession today to the geographies and logics of the plantation, a system of mass commodity production based on the labour of enslaved African peoples that proliferated for centuries, producing modernity and structuring the present condition.

The geography of the plantation spatializes how Black people were governed through violence against the body, anticipating the embodied violence that Black people suffer still and refuse. McKittrick visualizes the plantation as a town-like space divided into areas that were permissible and off-limits for the enslaved, including a main house, barns, slave quarters, a cemetery, a crop area, a pasture, fields, an auction block.... And, if the enslaved were controlled within the plantation, civilians patrolled beyond to return fugitives to bondage, constituting an early form of police.¹⁷

The plantation was also linked to economic zones through roads, rail networks, ships, which captures the logic of the plantation as a prototype of modernity—part of a global economy of imperial administration that secured, and secures, capital for propertied individuals through the exploitation of non-white and poor peoples indigenous to widespread places. As a logic, the plantation normalized violence by determining whose life is expendable for the benefit others.¹⁸ In this sense, the plantation is not a singular parcel of land, but "reified global segregations,"¹⁹ and the terror inflicted upon Black peoples on literal plantations cannot be separated from the spatial and corporeal violence of Europeans and their descendants mapping the globe (partition, colonies, protectorates, mandate and trust territories, apartheid, reserves, pass systems, Jim Crow, the industrial factory, the enclosure of the commons...).

When reflecting on the jurisdiction that Canada claims over Black people, it is therefore crucial to acknowledge this occurs on Indigenous lands, which were stolen and carved into reservations, bans on gathering, and residential schools. Not unlike slave catchers, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police crushed Indigenous rebellion.²⁰ These spatial and corporeal delineations secured Canada's statehood by defining a national territory and settling a white population at the expense of

¹⁶ Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 3 (2013): 1–15.

¹⁷ Dorothy Roberts, "Abolition Constitutionalism," *Harvard Law Review* 133, no. 1 (2019): 20–21.

¹⁸ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40; McKittrick, "Plantation," 5.

¹⁹ McKittrick, "Plantation," 5.

²⁰ Maynard, *Policing*.

peoples defined by colonists as non-white (Indigenous, Black, Asian...) in idiosyncratic ways within the same territories.²¹

Theorizing the plantation requires an acknowledgement as well that slavery unfolded differently in the French and British colonies that became Canada than elsewhere. Black and Indigenous persons were enslaved here primarily for domestic, agricultural, and other manual labour that was nonetheless violent.²² And merchants and institutions here were entangled with economies of transatlantic slavery in the United States, the Caribbean, and Europe.²³ The British conquest of New France consolidated the enslavement of African peoples here, as the British maintained Black bodies were best suited to labour.²⁴

Returning to continuities between past and present, it is clear that the logics of dispossession underlying slavery were *racializing* with enduring consequences on the Black body in space and place. Slavery was inseparable from the social construction of Black people as less-than-human. European science and cultural imperialism marked the Black body as more physical, and closer to nature, a surplus population. This objectification was reinforced through slave ship ledgers, purchase agreements, and commercial insurance in mathematical terms.²⁵

Spatial and bodily controls were *juridically inscribed* as well, rendering Black people strangers to the nation and criminals. Legally, the enslaved were property, non-citizens, whose limited personality was recognized to criminalize them.²⁶ Black people were objects, then criminal subjects were they to steal themselves from slavery. Black bodies were displayed as outlaws in runaway slave advertisements, enabling citizens to surveil and discipline with the force of law,²⁷ and shaping a Canadian national consciousness.

After all, the segregation and criminalization of Black people did not end upon the formal abolition of slavery and confederation. It was under Canadian laws and jurisdiction that there were bans on Black immigration.²⁸ There was the segregation of schools.²⁹ There were the “sun down” laws that prohibited Black people from moving about after dark.³⁰ There was discriminatory law enforcement under prohibitions such as vagrancy.³¹ There was the displacement of Black

²¹ See Amar Bhatia, “Statehood, Canadian Sovereignty, and the Attempted Domestication of Indigenous Relations,” in *Decolonizing Law: Indigenous, Third World and Settler Perspectives*, ed. Sujith Xavier et al. (New York: Routledge, 2021).

²² Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2006).

²³ Ibid.; Charmaine Nelson et al., “Slavery and McGill: Bicentenary Recommendations” (self-published, 2020); Afua Cooper et al., “Report on Lord Dalhousie’s History on Slavery and Race” (Halifax: Dalhousie University, 2019).

²⁴ Barrington Walker, *The African Canadian Legal Odyssey: Historical Essays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

²⁵ NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008); Katherine McKittrick “Mathematics of Black Life,” *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 16–28.

²⁶ Hartman, *Scenes*, 33.

²⁷ Lindsay Nixon in Conversation with Charmaine Nelson, “Fugitive Portraits,” *Canadian Art*, July 17, 2017.

²⁸ Walker, *The African Canadian*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Maynard, *Policing*.

³¹ Ibid.

neighbourhoods: Hogan's Alley, Africville, Little Burgundy, Chatham.... In 1940, the Supreme Court of Canada endorsed segregation, when a Montréal tavern owner refused to serve Fred Christie, an African Canadian man from Jamaica.³² Although Christie's ancestors had been enslaved in the Caribbean, not in the colonies that became Canada, anti-Black racism coalesced around his body in Montréal, then at the Supreme Court.

Scholars such as Robyn Maynard and Barrington Walker have traced this *longue durée* of policing Black life in Canada, bringing readers to the present, when Black people are racially profiled and disproportionately incarcerated.³³ The present condition is grounded in racial ideologies and practices that crystallized over centuries. Contemporary legal techniques that criminalize Black people have thus "refigured" techniques from slavery and post-slavery periods,³⁴ including police discretion to conduct street and highway checks, to target neighbourhoods, and to lay charges under prohibitions such as trespass, loitering, and incivility.

The police killings that forced protests during the early pandemic reproduced these disciplining legal techniques in a nation where Black people are portrayed as predisposed to criminality and "domestic enemies of and inside the settler-state."³⁵ Crucially, the carceral methods of pandemic management amplified the risks of government violence against Black people, given the enhancement of police discretion to control the streets.³⁶

During the early pandemic, Canadian jurisdictions enhanced police authority to regulate space through stay-at-home orders, curfews, and bans on gathering.³⁷ Parks, beaches, and community gardens were closed. People were mandated to stay two metres apart from anyone not living in their household. Police officers patrolled outdoor spaces to enforce these rules. A breach could entail fines possibly snowballing into imprisonment.

Taking to the streets during the pandemic in support of Black life must be understood in this light. Black people experienced heightened risks of discipline under pandemic laws,³⁸ making the moment unique *and* part of continued policing under the plantation logics of Canadian public safety.³⁹ Although the uprisings for Black life were not aimed at pandemic controls, the protesters opposed carceral laws that permit structural racism, which the pandemic measures compounded.

The protests therefore condemned discriminatory policing under Canadian laws. The protests most vocally opposed governance as violence against Black

³² *Christie v. The York Corporation*, [1940] SCR 139.

³³ Walker, *The African Canadian*; Maynard, *Policing*.

³⁴ Hartman, *Scenes*, 202.

³⁵ Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2022), 11.

³⁶ Melayna Lamb and Lambros Fatsis, *Policing the Pandemic: How Public Health Becomes Public Order* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2021).

³⁷ "COVID-19 Emergency Measures Tracker," McCarthy Tétrault LLP, accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.mccarthy.ca/en/insights/articles/covid-19-emergency-measures-tracker>

³⁸ Canadian Civil Liberties Association, "Stay Off the Grass: COVID-19 and Law Enforcement in Canada" (June 2020), iv; Jennifer Cobbina, Ashleigh LaCourse, and Soma Chaudhuri, "Protesting During a Pandemic: Narratives on Risk Taking and Motivation to Participating in the 2020 March on Washington," *Crime & Delinquency* 67, no. 8 (2021): 1195–1220; Lamb and Fatsis, *Policing*.

³⁹ Robyn Maynard, "Police Abolition/Black Revolt," *Topia* 41 (2020): 70–78.

people, given the erasure of slavery and its legacies, including police brutality, in narratives of the Canadian state. In condemning anti-Black racism, marchers nonetheless also called for a reckoning with the plantation logics that are foundational to Canadian settler colonialism. These fundamental critiques of Canadian statehood had specific resonance with the death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet, a Black, Ukrainian, and Indigenous woman.

At the same time, I perceive in the marches a transformation of the streets into geographies of freedom that were not determined by legalized violence. If the uprisings demanded a reckoning with Canadian laws and the state, they simultaneously exceeded Canada's jurisdiction to speak the law through the act of being present in spaces and places of the protesters' making. The protests were therefore not solely oppositional,⁴⁰ Black people and allies marched defined by and irreducible to domination.

You will recall that for Hartman freedom could be held momentarily in embodied practices of those subject to the most extreme domination that was transatlantic slavery. For McKittrick as well, the plantation logics of Black dispossession after slavery cannot stop people from transfiguring city life. The past, while continuous and structuring, cannot determine plantation futures.⁴¹ In this sense, the presence of Black people and compatriots during the protests embodied alternative places and spaces not beholden to hegemonic structures, "reconfiguring the ways in which the nation is inhabited by black and other subaltern communities."⁴²

Inspired by these insights about reinvention and freedom, I suggest that the marches for Black life during the early pandemic opposed the injustices of Canadian laws and statehood, while they exceeded Canada's jurisdiction. This ambivalence is epitomized by the sense that they were revolts *and* wakes to mourn the dead. Protests within Canada were also connected to uprisings that transgressed borders and the time that Canada has existed. The protests invoked a Black radical tradition that includes the insurrection against Saint-Domingue, the march from Selma to Montgomery, the processions to mourn the killing of Anthony Griffin, the Movement for Black Lives, African Liberation Day....⁴³ To protest for Black life in the early pandemic was this errantry of the exiled,⁴⁴ against dominance but not of it, spanning empires and generations, and gesturing towards freedom.

Practicing an Ethic of Care

Practicing mutual aid during the early pandemic likewise constituted a refusal of Canadian laws and jurisdiction that gestured towards freedom. Below, I explore how Black and allied collectives mobilized among themselves, for example pooling funds for those experiencing poverty and assuming the shared risk of marching. In doing so, I say they condemned Canada's neglect of social services for Black

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 70–74.

⁴¹ McKittrick, "Plantation."

⁴² McKittrick, *Demonic*, 119.

⁴³ See Maynard, "Police Abolition," 71.

⁴⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

communities and realized an ethic of care that Black feminists have nurtured to survive and flourish through self-reliance exceeding state jurisdiction.

As well, I suggest such practices of care implicitly opposed and exceeded Canada's designation of essential workers, whose legislated provision of care compounded precarities of Black life, as Black people were disproportionately employed in affected sectors. My focus is not on whether essential workers refused to discharge legal obligations in protest—although many joined temporary *strikes* for Black lives. Rather, I say, in the act of providing informal care, broader collectives implicitly condemned the unequal distribution of government services and discriminatory pandemic regulations to provide such services,⁴⁵ while they refashioned care.

My intuition here expands on Saidiya Hartman's observations about transient freedom, in particular the ambivalence of pleasure under slavery. Hartman describes how performing dance and song was a form of dominance mandated under slavery (on the auction block, along the coffle...), while enslaved persons experienced pleasures of dance and song apart to resist oppression and anticipate freedom (gathering covertly to sing and move their hips...).⁴⁶ Hartman's focus was on the contradictory intimacies of dominance, resistance, and self-refashioning in performances of pleasure. Her insights nonetheless parallel the ambivalence of care during the early pandemic because care was a form of dominance (whether neglected or mandated), while refashioning care resisted dominance and prefigured freedom.

Dionne Brand's words remind us of this ambivalence between dominance and care during the early pandemic:

I've spent my days thinking about the current political situation. And I noticed with shock and a certain bitter laughter, that the people who espoused cutbacks, belt tightening, austerity, privatization, the people who made up the atrocious clause, "running the country like a business," have been spun around 180 degrees. Where they advocated, over the last 30 to 40 years, shrinking the state they have now swiftly expanded it.... why did they drag us through thirty years of dispossessing, dismantling, and disenfranchising? Well. Capital. I guess. Each day when the government trots out what it will do next is an opportunity to witness its intrinsic crisis and failure, its quotidian failures and its hypocrisies.

... "We must get the economy moving", they say. And, "we must get people back to work," they say.... Most of my friends and family never stopped working anyway—they work in health and community services.... Because seriously, what is it to get people "back to work" if there is no remedy or vaccine? If some people have never stopped working.... What is the calculation by which one arrives at this cruel expendability.⁴⁷

Brand's words juxtapose how Canada neglected social services for decades, then expanded the state during the early pandemic, including through legislated care

⁴⁵ E.g., Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals*, 42–43; Maynard, "Police Abolition," 71.

⁴⁶ Hartman, *Scenes*, 17–48.

⁴⁷ Brand, "On Narrative."

that reinforced the expendability of Black life. To understand how informal care responded to and expressed transient freedom from this governance as violence, I first consider how Black people were significantly represented among essential workers and persons who required care during the early pandemic.

Essential workers were friends and family, Brand emphasizes, providing health and social care, such as nursing, and personal, migrant, and shelter support work. Essential workers also laboured in agriculture, cleaning, grocery stores, waste collection, and factories, among other sectors not ordinarily defined as care work, albeit each provided necessities of life during this period for the public benefit. As with the plantation logics of Black dispossession – where Black bodies are constructed as outside the nation – this public benefit did not include Black people. Rather, the Canadian “COVID-19 citizen” was raced, classed, abled, gendered, and heteronormative, with subaltern communities, including Black communities, working in jobs that exposed them to illness.⁴⁸

One-third of employed Black women worked in health care and social assistance during the early pandemic, the majority of whom had migrated to Canada.⁴⁹ Possibly one-fifth of Black people worked in these fields.⁵⁰ Migrant agricultural workers, whose numbers increased under Canadian pandemic measures, were overwhelmingly Jamaican, Mexican, and Guatemalan men.⁵¹ A high proportion of Black people worked in informal sectors and the gig economy.⁵² And disproportionate rates of unemployment among Black people across Canada during the early pandemic may have pushed more into frontline work.⁵³

Similar to the hyper-policing of Black life, there are structural reasons why Black people were significantly represented in these sectors, tying slavery to Black dispossession in Canada. Although the presence of Black people on these lands preceded confederation, Black people increasingly came to Canada in the latter half of the twentieth century under migration classes for care and manual labour, such as nursing, domestic work, and agricultural labour,⁵⁴ whose present-day iterations were at the core of essential work.

It is no coincidence that such fields recall the labour that slavery entailed, given Black people across the Americas were denied land and decent work after abolition and thus were made vulnerable to servitude.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the creation of these

⁴⁸ Melanie Knight, Renée Nichole Ferguson, and Rai Reece, “‘It’s Not Just about Work and Living Conditions’: The Underestimation of the COVID-10 Pandemic for Black Canadian Women,” *Social Sciences* 10, no. 6 (2021): 210.

⁴⁹ Statistics Canada, “A Labour Market Snapshot of Black Canadians during the Pandemic,” (24 February 2021).

⁵⁰ Canadian Labour Congress, “Lessons of the Pandemic Must Lead to Change for Frontline Workers,” October 7, 2020.

⁵¹ Elise Hjalmarson, “Sentenced for the Season: Jamaican Migrant Farmworkers on Okanagan Orchards,” 63 no. 4 *Race & Class* (2021): 81–100.

⁵² Alliance for Healthier Communities, “Statement from Black Health Leaders on COVID-19’s Impact on Black Communities in Ontario,” April 20, 2023.

⁵³ Janet Kemei *et al.*, “Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Black Communities in Canada,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20 no. 2 (2023): 1580.

⁵⁴ Walker, *The African Canadian*, 34–35; Maynard, *Policing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.), 64–70.

⁵⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935); Hartman, *Scenes*; Rinaldo Walcott, *On Property: Policing, Prisons, and the Call for Abolition* (Windsor: Biblioasis, 2021).

migration classes was meant to circumvent prohibitions against Black migration introduced around the turn of the century, which I mentioned before. Community organizations and Caribbean governments fought for mobility through such immigration programs seventy years ago. However, many Black people continue to fulfill similar career paths which, while honourable and dignified, should not be a default, nor entail precarious conditions.

Beyond migration regimes, labour precarity in Canada arises from multiple sources. Black students residing in Canada are systemically pushed away from higher education through streaming, expulsions, and the devaluation of their talents.⁵⁶ Black children and youth are also disproportionately criminalized across the education system. During the pandemic, one school called police on a four-year-old girl, and this was not the first such case.⁵⁷ It is possible to glimpse in the education system many routes to labour precarity in Canada because of the weight of history on anti-Black racism in the present.

Against this background, Black communities also experienced an increased need for health and social care during the early pandemic. In 2020, Black people were found to have had the highest COVID-19 mortality rates in this country.⁵⁸ Explanations for why this was the case include the significant representation of Black people among essential workers and systemic discrimination against Black people in accessing government services, which the pandemic exacerbated.⁵⁹

The virus concentrated around residential areas where essential workers and their loved ones lived.⁶⁰ Black households were significantly low-income during the pandemic and, among low-income households, Black people were the most vulnerable to death from the virus.⁶¹ Black people also experience disproportionate homelessness in Canada from reinforcing structural failures (criminalization, income precarity, discriminatory housing...),⁶² yet unhoused persons were fined under pandemic laws and evicted from encampments, even as shelters neglected COVID-19 precautions and had insufficient beds. As well, Black people disproportionately suffered pandemic conditions in prisons, given their hyperincarceration by the Canadian state.

There are many examples of these mathematics of Black life during the early pandemic, but I will pause... to recall what McKittrick and Hartman remind us... that violence cannot determine how we are known to ourselves, nor determine the

⁵⁶ E.g., Emma Stirling Cameron and Keisha Jefferies, "Anti-Black Racism in Canadian Education: A Call to Action to Support the Next Generation" *Healthy Populations Journal* 1, no. 1 (2021): 11–15; René Houle, "Changes in the Socioeconomic Situation of Canada's Black Population, 2001 to 2016" (Statistics Canada, 2020).

⁵⁷ Cheyenne Bholla, "Family and Community Outraged after Kitchener School Calls Police on Four-Year-Old," *The Record*, February 24, 2022; *JKB v Peel* (Police Services Board), 2020 HRTO 172.

⁵⁸ Shikha Gupta and Nicole Aitken, "COVID-19 Mortality among Racialized Populations in Canada and Its Association with Income" (Statistics Canada, 2022).

⁵⁹ Marin Emily Thompson et al., "COVID-19: A Case for the Collection of Race Data in Canada and Abroad" (Government of Canada, 2021).

⁶⁰ Amrita Rao et al., "A Disproportionate Epidemic: COVID-19 Cases and Deaths among Essential Workers in Toronto, Canada" *Annals of Epidemiology* 63 (2021): 63–67.

⁶¹ Gupta and Aitken, "COVID-19."

⁶² Emma Kaplan, "How Has Canada's History of Anti-Black Racism Impacted Today's Experiences of Homelessness?," *Homeless Hub*, February 23, 2021.

future of Black livingness. This paper acknowledges Black dispossession under Canadian laws and jurisdiction to foreground that protests for Black life resisted dominance and experimented with freedom.⁶³ Black and allied communities practicing informal care throughout the early pandemic must be understood in this way—as refusing Canada’s hypocrisy in neglecting social services and legislating workers to supply care that retrenched anti-Black racism, making care an ambivalent practice at the interstices of dominance, opposition, and redress.

Practicing an ethic of care took many forms. For one thing, taking to the streets not only meant withstanding law enforcement, but the prospect of illness and death at a time when there was great uncertainty and vulnerability. Those who felt compelled to march deliberated about whether they should expose themselves and persons around them.⁶⁴ Their deliberations instantiated care, which mourners carried forward into precautions of masking, distancing, and isolating afterward.⁶⁵ This acceptance of shared risk moved “the character of the protests in meaningful ways from those that occurred historically.”⁶⁶

Beyond the marches, Black and allied peoples advocated in solidarity for persons living in prisons and migrant detention centres, and persons charged for protesting during the pandemic. Collectives provided food, water, and shelter to unhoused persons. And they risked their safety doing so, as Canadian law enforcement cracked down on mutual aid, for example when the City of Toronto sought an injunction against Khaleel Seivwright for building tiny shelters.

Collectives also pooled funds for Black community members experiencing precarity that financial support might ease. These funds mimicked traditional economic redistribution among women across Africa and the diaspora.⁶⁷ Black women have long pooled funds with family and trusted others in arrangements called *sol* (Haiti), *partner* (Jamaica), *susu* (Ghana), and *box hand* (Guyana), among terms that denote an informal savings network.⁶⁸ Economic support of this kind is unconditional and provides transient freedom from structural conditions, such as financial hardship, gender dynamics, and the unequal access of migrants to credit.⁶⁹

It is therefore important to acknowledge that mutual aid during the early pandemic rekindled Black social traditions of care. Mutual aid took many forms under slavery, then during the post-slavery period, for example pooling resources to plant food, bury the dead, furnish education, and support legal causes. The Black Panther Party’s survival program is a publicized example.⁷⁰ Within the gendered

⁶³ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

⁶⁴ Cobbina, LaCourse, and Chaudhuri, “Protesting.”

⁶⁵ E.g., Dave Dhaval et al., “Black Lives Matter Protests and Risk Avoidance: The Case of Civil Unrest During a Pandemic,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper No. 27408 (2020).

⁶⁶ Cobbina, LaCourse, and Chaudhuri, “Protesting,” 1197.

⁶⁷ Vicky Mochama, “Black Communities Have Known about Mutual Aid All Along,” *The Walrus* (September 1, 2020).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Caroline Shenaz Hossein, “Banking Co-ops Run by Black Women Have a Longtime Legacy of Helping People,” *The Conversation* (March 8, 2021).

⁷⁰ Dean Spade, “Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival,” *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (2020): 131–151.

dynamics of the Party, Black women delivered those programs, which supplied food, education, housing...⁷¹ In fact, Black women's and Black queer collectives have often assumed the responsibility of providing care, including in Canada, as with the Congress of Black Women and the 101 Dewson Street collective.⁷²

The involvement of Black women and queer folk underscores that mutual aid realizes a Black feminist ethic of care. And those leading the Movement for Black Lives have identified a Black feminist ethic of care as their inspiration.⁷³ Patricia Hill Collins explains that a Black feminist ethic of care is rooted in relational ways of knowing that draw on African humanism passed down across generations.⁷⁴ The concept of *ubuntu* in the Bantu languages epitomizes this philosophy of self and the collective, which Black feminism puts into practice: "I am because you are."

Given the systemic oppression of Black people, the relationship between a Black feminist ethic of care and the state is fraught.⁷⁵ The practice of "other mothering" illustrates how this relational philosophy resists liberal governmentality, as Black women habitually welcome biological and social kin into their homes through consensual arrangements that circumvent discriminatory "child welfare" interventions.⁷⁶ At the same time, I suggest that in bypassing positive law, practicing a Black feminist ethic of care embodies provisional freedom from the state.

During the early pandemic, Black and allied communities modelled such care offside Canada's discriminatory regulation of social services. They nurtured resistance that opposed the injustices of legislated essential work and the unequal distribution of health care. They simultaneously refashioned care inspired by intergenerational lifeways that support Black life not determined by Canada's jurisdiction.

Calling for Abolition

This final section reflects on calls for abolition that rose to prominence across the marches for Black life and the media, although abolition politics preceded the pandemic, like my other examples of protest. These calls for abolition contemporaneously opposed governance as violence (not only police and prisons) and expressed transient freedom—in this case, by demanding Canadian laws be dismantled, while reimagining how human relations should be transformed beyond any hegemonic jurisdiction. Crucially, by proposing transformation, calls for

⁷¹ Joy James, "Framing the Panther: Assata Shakur and Black Female Agency," in Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, ed., *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

⁷² "Our Dance of Revolution," directed by Phillip Pike (2019); Shirley Small and Esmeralda Thornhill, "HARAMBEC! Quebec Black Women Pulling Together," *Journal of Black Studies* 38, no. 3 (2008): 427–442.

⁷³ Deva Woody, *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): 90–91.

⁷⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge 2018): 281–284.

⁷⁵ Jennifer Christine Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 79.

⁷⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist*, 192–98.

abolition also sought redress, for example defunding the police, eliminating prisons, and redistributing funds to communities.

Saidiya Hartman's work helps to understand that dominance, resistance, and transient freedom overlap with redress. She describes how enslaved persons implicitly sought redress by easing their pained bodies, ordinarily subject to violence, through the pleasures of dance and song. Like freedom, such redress was ambivalent and incomplete. It could not "restore or remedy loss, redeem the unceremoniously buried, or bridge the transatlantic divide."⁷⁷ Nonetheless, redress could attend to joy and social life, endeavour to meet needs and desires, and reconfigure the self from objectification.⁷⁸

Redress, in Hartman's telling, therefore entailed transforming the self and the collective, which I suggest protests during the early pandemic did as well. Whereas taking back the streets and mutual aid may have embodied redress immediately (reconfiguring the self and the collective), calls for abolition were a discursive practice that implicitly enacted redress *and* articulated imaginaries of how to obtain redress through total transformation.

Dionne Brand casts our minds back to these calls for abolition, which partly sought redress by discrediting the rhetoric of "returning to normal" that governments espoused in Canada:

Those in power keep invoking "the normal" as in "when we get back to normal." I've developed an aversion to that word normal.... The repetition of "when things return to normal" as if that normal was not in contention. Was the violence against women normal? Was the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism normal? Was white supremacy normal? Was the homelessness growing on the streets normal? Were homophobia and transphobia normal? Was pervasive surveillance and policing of Black and Indigenous and people of colour normal? Yes, I suppose all of that was normal. But, I and many other people hate that normal. Who would one have to be to sit in that normal restfully, to mourn it, or to desire its continuance? We are, in fact, still in that awful normal that is narrativized as minor injustices, or social ills that would get better if some of us waited, if we had the patience to bear it, if we had noticed and were grateful for the miniscule "progress" etc.⁷⁹

Brand's words reframe mainstream narratives of returning to normal during the early pandemic from a subaltern perspective. She questions narratives of progress towards some future normal that is more inclusive. Her words condemn Canada's politics of recognition that keep poor and non-white people down through liberal beneficence,⁸⁰ implying that a reckoning must occur through structural transformation. Brand therefore evokes the calls for abolition that resounded while she was writing.

As we saw earlier, Brand identifies capitalism as an impetus for Canada's exploitative politics, and abolition movements during the early pandemic likewise

⁷⁷ Hartman, *Scenes*, 76.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 77.

⁷⁹ Brand, "On Narrative."

⁸⁰ See on the "politics of recognition" in the context of Indigenous resurgence: Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: The Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

took aim at this ideological structure. In other words, the policing of Black peoples, and their lack of access to government care, which I discussed before, were assumed in calls for abolition to be pathologies of a much deeper structural disease: “processes of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”⁸¹

With these words the abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore described racial capitalism, which is a term that captures how the emergence of capitalism and racialization have been historically intertwined. Racial capitalism also denotes that these processes remain indissociable because of the weight that history bears on the present. Calls for abolition during the early pandemic spread this message widely, that capital accumulation for some will always depend upon the exclusion of others, entrenching hierarchies among peoples deemed more and less human, which is at the core of the plantation logics that, McKittrick explains, regulate space and race, including and beyond carceral systems.

Like other forms of protest I have discussed so far, calls for abolition during the early pandemic were therefore rooted in Black radical traditions that exceeded Canada’s jurisdiction. The concept of racial capitalism, for example, emerged from Black Marxist denunciations of apartheid in South Africa, before Cedric Robinson expanded the term to describe global processes of accumulation and dispossession that consolidated under the transatlantic slave trade.⁸² Claiming the term “abolition” also evokes historical movements to abolish slavery—movements that preceded Canada’s assertions of sovereignty. Abolition politics took forms such as Du Bois’s aspirations for abolition democracy,⁸³ and later prison abolition. Calls for abolition that gained attention during the early pandemic looked transnationally and intergenerationally to these traditions, which inspired resistance to the Canadian state and anticipated freedom from it.

In the process, they evoked the imperative of redress. Again, Hartman tells us, redress could never undo the past, but it could reconfigure human relations (towards joy and sociality, where needs and desires are met). Crucially, rising calls in summer 2020 offered insights into *how* redress might be realized through concrete “mindful actions.”⁸⁴ Whereas popular discourses about abolition in Canada at times propped up a dichotomy between abolition and reform, nuanced messaging that gained attention during the early pandemic emphasized the necessity of intervening in state institutions so long as these interventions are *transformative*.

The paradox that there may be reforms that are “non-reformist” spread across media and conversations, drawing on the work of abolitionists such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, Angela Davis, Dan Berger, David Stein, and Dorothy Roberts. This term “non-reformist reforms,” coined by André Gortz, proposes that

⁸¹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberation* (New York: Verso Books, 2022), 475.

⁸² Robinson, *Black Marxism*. See also Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

⁸³ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*.

⁸⁴ Gilmore, *Abolition*, 490.

some institutional changes can “reduce the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system’s inability to solve the crisis it creates.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, calls for abolition also heeded the warning that reforms alone are insufficient, and that reforms which fail to connect “radical critique” with “a broader transformative vision”⁸⁶ reinscribe dispossession with an air of progress.

The *R. v. Morris* decision in Canada illustrated these tensions between reform and abolition during the period.⁸⁷ Rendered after the 2020 uprisings, the decision recognized that systemic racism contributes to the disproportionate policing and incarceration of Black people. It further held that this finding can diminish the culpability of Black individuals and can be factored into the sentencing stage of criminal proceedings. However, the Court avoided a critical reflection that calls for abolition had been offering, which was that carceral systems are part of deeper structural inequalities and thus require re-assessment. The Court asserted instead: “we reject the claim that societal complicity in anti-Black racism diminishes the need to denounce and deter serious criminal conduct.”⁸⁸ The task of sentencing judges, the Court said, “is not primarily aimed at holding the criminal justice system accountable for systemic failures.”⁸⁹

It is also important to highlight that the *Morris* decision allows anti-Black racism to be factored into sentencing only after a person has pled guilty or been convicted. Mitigating evidence may then re-racialize the Black person through a deficit lens⁹⁰—an unfortunate product of oppression, without agency, except as a criminal subject, whose penalization still provides vindication and deterrence for Canada’s public safety. As I emphasized before, this public safety does not include the safety of Black communities nor, I would add, the safety of the criminalized person. The outcome of this reasoning was the Court’s finding that “the seriousness of Mr. Morris’ crimes required a significant term of imprisonment.”⁹¹

Another finding of the Court re-racialized Black people, collectively, through a deficit lens. The *Morris* decision partly drew on sentencing provisions used to ameliorate the mass incarceration of Indigenous peoples in Canada and, in distinguishing Black and Indigenous peoples, the Court held that “there is no basis to conclude that Black offenders, or Black communities, share a fundamentally different view of justice [from Canadian law].”⁹² When I read those words, I thought, “What about the different view of justice that inspires abolition movements? What about centuries-long demands for redress?” Leaving aside the history of these Black radical traditions, diverse protesters supporting Black life had been rallying around these views of justice while the case was underway.

⁸⁵ E.g., *ibid.* 467; Roberts, “Abolition”; Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba, and David Stein, “What Abolitionists Do,” *Jacobin*, August 24, 2017.

⁸⁶ Berger et al., “What abolitionists do.”

⁸⁷ *R v Morris*, 2021 ONCA 680.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* para 86.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* para 56.

⁹⁰ I am grateful to Danardo Jones for our conversations on this point.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* para 177.

⁹² *Ibid.* para 122; Maria Dugas, “Anderson, Morris and the Need to Consider Systemic Anti-Black Racism in Sentencing Black Canadians,” *Dalhousie Law Journal Blog* (December 3, 2021).

The *Morris* case is dispiriting, not because sentencing procedures will never dismantle the prison-industrial complex. Keeping people out of prisons is a meaningful, if incomplete, form of redress for individuals in the abolitionist spirit, alongside concrete measures that may be systemic or discrete, such as redistributing funds from police to communities and providing care offside the administrative state.⁹³ However, the reasoning in *Morris* did not reduce the power of Canada's carceral system through critical reflection. Rather, in important ways, it reinscribed the expendability of Black individuals and communities in Canada, and it exposed the challenge of reform within the jurisdiction that Canada asserts over Black life and death.

The ruling was most stark against another decision rendered the year before in Nova Scotia, which the Court could have relied on more to embrace transformative conceptions of justice. In *R v. Anderson*, the judge had found that sentences which “primarily emphasize deterrence and denunciation have not made our communities safer,” prisons divert funds from Afrocentric services, “systems of incarceration have failed to address the needs of African Nova Scotians,” and alternative frames of responsibility and reparation can foster restorative justice outside prisons at the community level.⁹⁴

If these two decisions addressed similar issues, their qualitative distance is clear. *Anderson* gestured to transformation by focusing on alternative imaginaries of justice (reparation, restoration...) and therefore evoked the understanding among abolitionists that social relations must be rooted in an ethic of care. Deva Woodley indeed explains, “The politics of care is an abolitionist politics.”⁹⁵

Abolition politics demand that society reckon with the deep structural oppression that imbalances *all relationships* within the Canadian carceral state by extending care to people who have been harmed as much as the perpetrators of harm. It is precisely because those who cause harm are “not disposable,” they “will not be thrown away,” that “they are required to be accountable for their action by repairing and restoring, as much as possible, what they have damaged or destroyed.”⁹⁶

Calls for abolition during the early pandemic similarly reimaged what it means to repair harms that arise, and worsen, from the selective exclusions of racial capitalism, whether policing and imprisonment, poverty, or inaccessible health care. They articulated tangible programs that reconfigure being human in relation to one another, such as practicing mutual aid (“I am because you are”). These discursive calls across media and in conversations resisted Black dispossession in Canada and anticipated freedom *for everyone* (from Wet’suwet’en lands to Haiti to Palestine), which provided redress in the instance and drew attention to the imperative of redress through total transformation.

⁹³ See, e.g., Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

⁹⁴ *R v. Anderson*, 2020 NSPC 10, paras. 88, 92, 104.

⁹⁵ Woodly, *Reckoning*, 88 [emphasis added].

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Coda

The reckoning might be now.⁹⁷

Two years after the global uprisings, I moved from Toronto/Tkaronto to Montréal/Tiohtiá:ke. Movements for Black life persist in my new home, and I recently attended a gathering in support of Black life in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Park. I encountered colleagues there, community organizers, intellectuals, students. There were children running around, joyous, getting their faces painted. There was food to be shared, and circles to discuss policing in schools. I mention this because I have mostly used the past tense throughout this piece to capture the uniqueness of summer 2020, although protests for Black life preceded the early pandemic and have not ceased.

Protests for Black life, before, during, and after the early pandemic, have advanced transformative visions of a future informed by the most precarious—persons working insecure jobs, persons experiencing homelessness, persons who withstand the lash of law enforcement... Protest demands are rooted in distinct conceptions of law and the state that Black radical traditions have offered transnationally and across generations, especially a Black feminist ethic of care. Such fundamentally different views of human relations both condemn Canada's unjust laws and exceed the plantation logics of any hegemonic jurisdiction, providing freedom, however transitory, from racial capitalism.

Those who march, who provide mutual aid, and who converse, therefore reconfigure livingness amid violence, which embodies partial redress. They remake spaces and places hitherto denied them. They foster care as a praxis of being human.⁹⁸ They mourn, are present, and tell truths, which are vital to mindful actions that tend towards a horizon of lasting freedom.

But a horizon cannot be possessed.

To protest for Black life, in Canada and elsewhere, means moving through the light that the horizon casts, refashioning the self and the collective daily, “so that we may say not that we own gold but that a luminous golden spirit owns us.”⁹⁹

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⁹⁷ Brand, “On Narrative.”

⁹⁸ Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁹⁹ Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 557.