

## Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Prefigurative Politics"

# Engendering the Prefigurative: Feminist Praxes That Bridge a Politics of Prefigurement and Survival

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### Abstract

Prefigurative politics are typically understood as experiments in living, laboring or provisioning that are alternatives to 'what is' and prefigure 'what could be.' This paper rethinks prefigurative politics, which scholars have often approached by emphasizing their economic and political structures, not the transformation of social relationships and power in these experiments. Despite this scholarly trend, many collectivities organizing around a politics of survival engage in prefigurative practices. In fact, in the process of resisting domination, they are re-imagining social relationships and power. In this paper, we draw on women of color feminist theory to explore the tensions of practicing principled politics and social justice in the deeply compromised spaces of struggle for those groups that act in the radical in-between of prefigurative politics and the politics of survival. By analyzing a reproductive justice organizing project called 'We are BRAVE' as a case study, we re-imagine prefigurative politics through three central elements: relationality, self-determination, and intersectionality.

**Keywords:** politics of survival, relationality, self-determination, intersectionality, We are BRAVE, radical homeplaces, theory in the flesh, coalition as thirdspace

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Prefigurative politics are typically understood as experiments in living, laboring or provisioning that are alternatives to 'what is' and prefigure 'what could be.' Scholarship has largely focused on their economic and political structures (as in Wright, 2010) but less on the transformation of social relationships and power in these experiments. At the same time, many collectivities organizing around a politics of survival engage in prefigurative practices. Although their work may not be described in such terms, they are re-imagining social relationships and power as they organize to resist domination. In this paper, we explore the tensions of practicing principled politics and relations of justice in the deeply compromised spaces of struggle for those groups that act in the radical in-between of prefigurative politics and the politics of survival. By reflecting on the collective action of political subjects who have been marginalized in the scholarship of the prefigurative and by examining the contributions of their radical labor, we re-imagine the meaning of prefigurative politics. We engage reproductive justice and women of color feminist

theory as lenses to frame our arguments and contend that a new prefigurative politics should include: a) a sense of relationality borne of desire; b) bids for self-determination derived from lived experience; and c) intersectional engagement in coalitions. In short, we bring new attention to the transformation of (and through) relationships and power.

Reproductive justice refers to “all people having the economic, social and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, genders, sexuality and reproduction for ourselves, our families and our communities in all areas of our lives” (Western States Center, 2014). Women of color are the primary political subjects in this approach to organizing. The reproductive justice and women of color lenses bring into high relief the prefigurative *processes* in which many engage, via enclave relational spaces, critical pedagogies, and intersectional engagement in coalitions. These lenses lift up Freire’s (2000) concept of “transforming labor” via a politics of survival. Such a politics is constructed out of shared interests, values, and a humanizing culture in subjects’ daily bids for survival – whether surviving state violence; barriers to basic needs in health, food, and housing; toxic narratives that discipline and criminalize certain bodies; or other struggles. We begin the paper by briefly reviewing extant scholarship on prefigurative politics including alternative forms of social and economic organization combined with participatory and relational processes and identify points of departure for our own conception of the prefigurative. Following that, we get into the heart of our arguments about how a women of color reproductive justice lens expands the theory, practice, and aspirations of prefigurative politics. Specifically, we argue that women of color feminist praxes bridge prefigurement and survival through three strategies. First, ‘homeplaces’ create spaces for collective leadership and building power that are radically humanizing while, at the same time, rooted in political realities. Second, ‘theory in the flesh’ derives politics from bodies and physical places. Third, ‘coalition’ operates both as a strategic formation and as a subjectivity that centers people’s deeply lived and embodied experiences of intermeshedness, what we often call intersectionality. To illustrate the three strategies, we take a case study approach, drawing on the work of ‘We are BRAVE’ (Building Reproductive Autonomy and Voices for Equity), an organizing project in Oregon, USA, with the goal of building the capacity of people of color-led organizations to integrate reproductive justice into their work. The first author of the paper was deeply involved in We are BRAVE.

## A Brief History of Prefigurative Politics and Points of Departure

In the late 1960s, the term ‘prefigurative politics’ reflected aspirations for alternatives to the authoritarianism of traditional left political parties (Boggs, 1977; Epstein, 1991). The desire for self-determination expanded the meaning to include domination via not only production but also social relations and control within movements and in everyday life (Boggs, 1977; Breines, 1989). Prefigurative politics referred to experiments for building community in new ways, for example through creating anti-establishment counterculture in the anti-war movement or practicing participatory democracy and horizontal authority structures as in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Engler & Engler, 2014). Breines (1989) asserts that, though criticized for eschewing strategy for utopian escape, the New Left of the 1960s actually attempted to *hold* the tension between prefigurative and strategic politics, recognizing the need to engage in both.

The contemporary examples in this special thematic section have some important common threads; many imagine and/or actualize alternative modes of political economy hand-in-hand with participatory process. For example, workers’ collective ownership of the means of production aligns with shared decision-making as a basis for political economy. Likewise, land trusts, open-source licensing, and timebanks create alternatives to private ownership of goods and services as commodities. Participatory budgeting and restorative justice place shared responsibility

for decision-making in the hands of those directly affected by decisions – whether about local infrastructure and welfare or the reparation of harm to people. Others such as food sovereignty projects and eco-villages are largely animated by collective care, including care for nature and future generations.

These efforts prefigure ways of organizing communities as alternatives to capitalism, carceral justice, decision-making by elites, resource extraction, and inequitable distribution of material necessities. They aspire to ‘utopian’ arrangements of the good life and prefigure approaches to collective action that stand in stark contrast to the authoritarian relationships of, for example, some socialist parties (Boggs, 1977; Breines, 1989). A key point of departure for our re-imagining of prefigurative politics arises from the question, what grounds utopia?

The very word ‘utopia’ – coming from the Greek for ‘no-where’ – implies something impossible in real life. It is the original spirit of prefigurative politics: “the embodiment within the ongoing political practice of a movement ... those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Boggs, 1977). In other words, enacting in the present the polity to which one aspires. However, some worry that the ‘pre’ in prefigurative all too often slides into nostalgia for what might have existed ‘before’ systems and outside of relations of oppression. María Lugones (2003), for example, critiques utopian projects that strive to exist ‘outside’ the struggles of everyday life for an unwillingness to “think and act *against the grain of oppression*” (p. 5, emphasis added). Of course, there are interpretations of the utopian that lend themselves to such grounded struggles. For example, Stites (1989), comparing ‘everyday’ utopian projects of peasants in the Russian Revolution to the statist utopianism of Stalin, writes:

Those who took Utopia down from the light blue skies of Russian fantasy into living experimentalism enriched the revolutionary process. They invented and contrived, tried and erred, innovated and lived their innovations in what they believed to be the central spirit of the revolution. They attempted to bring the theory alive in a physical setting. (p. 10)

To understand what comprises the space of such possibility, we look to those collectivities engaged in radical organizing around their own survival. We take this view in order to center as political subjects those whose bodies and survival are most vulnerable in the face of institutional violence, those who ultimately will lose when movements ignore their lived realities. The Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network, for example, grew out of immediate response to food insecurity and food deserts. Black communities came together to develop self-determined cooperative agriculture in the face of disinvestment and institutional abandon, as well as to push back on the monopoly leadership in “local urban agriculture movement [by] young whites, who while well-intentioned, nevertheless, exert a degree of control inordinate to their numbers in Detroit’s population” (DBCFSN, n.d.). A central part of the work of DBCFSN is animated by reclaiming land ownership and building collective and mutually supportive relations to land, work that is rooted in a clear analysis of historical racism and of racial liberation.

The DBCFSN example engages an explicit analysis of what experience around race has to do with oppression and with liberation. In re-imagining prefigurative politics attention must be paid to the fact that both the experiment and the political analysis are rooted in survival. Exploring the intersection of experience with bids for survival surfaces rich considerations for projects such as Argentinian workers’ collectives takeover of factories that laid them off (Klein & Lewis, 2004), and houseless people and other members of the economic precariat participating in Occupy camps (Engler & Engler, 2014). A turn we see that prefigurative politics stand to make has to do with fully grappling with the ways in which political subjects form their identifications in and through their resistance to domination, as well as their relationships with each other, in the very real ‘here’ in which they operate.

## Re-Imagining a Prefigurative Politics

### Three Core Elements

We ground our re-imagining of prefigurative politics in three central elements: relationality, self-determination, and intersectionality. In keeping with the feminist adage, “the personal is political,” the relational dimensions of collective action (i.e., friendships, disagreements, trust-building and in general how people relate to one another) are necessary to their political possibilities themselves. We see the transformative work that happens in often intimate, relational spaces as vital for shifting from margins to center the values, narratives, claims and demands that are the substance of liberation. In our own involvement in collective action, we note that the kinds of spaces and relationships participants create, as part of the practice of actualizing their political commitments, prefigure the kinds of people, relationships, and society to which they aspire. People come together around issues that affect their lives and ground their organizing in a politics that, at its core, is centered on (re)claiming their own humanity and their right to self-determination.

Collective and individual self-determination that responds to the real circumstances of people’s lives, as they play out in the spaces and places in which they survive, must be a core element of a new prefigurative politics. Consistent with feminist standpoint of ‘privileging’ perspectives of those oppressed by inequities of power (Hartsock, 1983), many strains of community organizing are based on two core principles: that 1) justice is about people’s collective and individual rights to author their own fates, and 2) movements should center the leadership and experiences of those most impacted by the particular issues engaged. Self-determination calls for restructuring relations of power in society as well as in movements such that demands come from those most impacted. Collective self-determination also reflects the intellectual work through which groups prioritize issues emerging from their shared experiences and interests.

Finally, as Audre Lorde (1984) famously wrote, “There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” Black feminists remind us about the simultaneous struggles against racism, patriarchy, and class that many face and point to examples in which socialist, feminist and people of color liberation movements have failed to fully engage the interconnected apparatus of these systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality militates against the siloing and divide-and-conquer dynamics of single-issue politics; it requires everyone to bring their full selves into struggle so that movements don’t leave anyone behind.

In summary, our vision of a prefigurative politics puts the labor of communities to re-imagine relationality front and center. It locates this visionary labor in the real places and circumstances (and bodies) of people’s lives, in so doing centering intersectional subjectivities. A new prefigurative politics cannot be utopian in the sense that it exists outside of people’s struggles. Rather, the future to which we aspire must be worked out in our everyday materiality, in the relationships we create as we determine together what is in our common interest. We see prefigurative not as outside-of, but rather *inside of* (the everyday, the have-to). It is not something we create to call in a future without (or nostalgically *before*) oppression and violence but rather *in spite of* it. We want to lift up prefigurative processes that happen in collectivities in the everyday.

To do this, we bring women of color feminist praxis to bear in our own imagining (and contesting) of the prefigurative and draw from the anthology, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, and Democratic Futures*, co-edited by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty. *Genealogies* is the product of dialogues and collaborations among radical women of color scholars over the decade prior to its publication in 1997. Their political framework for a

women of color-centered feminist praxis is still relevant – indeed yet more urgent – today. Core elements are: *body politics*, recognition that the meanings that circumscribe people's bodies and sexualities are central to the way they are governed; *self-determination and intersubjectivity*; foregrounding the *critical agency and praxis* that subjects develop by interpreting their own experiences and deriving shared interests and visionary demands; developing practices and structures of collectivizing resources and responsibilities as *alternatives to capitalism*; and *transnational solidarity*. Building on this framework, we discuss three prefigurative strategies that engage the elements of relationality, self-determination, and authentic intersectionality – radical homeplaces as spaces to build and sustain prefigurative relationality, 'theory in the flesh' as a form of critical pedagogy to develop shared critique and collective interests, and engaging in coalition as a subjectivity rather than a strategic formation.

### **We are BRAVE as a Case Study of Prefigurative Politics**

For the rest of this paper, we discuss We are BRAVE, a reproductive justice organizing project as a case study of this conception of prefigurative politics. The first author was deeply involved in We are BRAVE, as a staff-person of Western States Center. Western States Center is a capacity-building organization rooted in the U.S. Pacific Northwest, whose goal is to strengthen social justice organizations and networks through training, organizational coaching, and bringing progressive groups together around shared goals. The Center designed and implemented We are BRAVE (Building Reproductive Autonomy and Voices for Equity) as a program to create a space for people of color-led organizations in Oregon to integrate reproductive justice into their own work. This project was animated by the goal of supporting and elevating the voices of communities of color in public advocacy for abortion access, in the face of historical and ongoing wedges driven by the Right between racial justice and reproductive rights (Silliman, Gerber Fried, Ross, & Gutierrez, 2004; Simpson, 2014; SisterSong, 2010). Western States Center is a multiracial organization, and We are BRAVE is led by people of color staff. The Center received funding from a national coalition that had identified a need to fill a gap in strategies to mobilize and deeply engage the leadership of communities most impacted by reproductive health access barriers.

The reproductive justice movement arose in the decades after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion in the U.S. Women of color found that the language and politics of mainstream reproductive rights movements – as characterized by National Organization of Women, NARAL, Planned Parenthood and others – did not adequately respond to the depth of institutional control over their reproductive autonomy (Luna, 2009; Silliman et al., 2004). Whereas a reproductive rights framework focuses on maintaining legal rights to abortion, reproductive justice centers the right of all people to have the resources and support to exercise autonomy over their own bodies, survival, and families, and thus calls for structural change led by women of color as those most impacted by reproductive oppression (ACRJ, 2005). The National Black Women's Health Project, SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (now Forward Together) and many others formed to organize for a broader range of reproductive freedoms – ending sterilization abuse, ensuring welfare rights, culturally-competent comprehensive sexuality education, contraceptive access, fighting environmental toxins disproportionately affecting communities of color and many other related human rights issues. These organizations created vital spaces to blunt these wedges and to build power among women of color in ways that link reproductive freedoms to a broader social justice vision. At the time that Western States Center created We are BRAVE, little such infrastructure existed in Oregon.

The centerpiece strategy in BRAVE was to bring 30 participants – nine representing three partner organizations, and the rest in individual capacity – together from October 2013 through December 2014 in quarterly residential convenings to build relationships, for political education and skills training, and to develop shared goals and



strategies for reproductive justice in Oregon. Participating organizations and leaders responded to an open call for applications. Many had spoken previously to project staff in a Spring 2013 ‘community scan’ effort, in which Western States Center did one-on-one interviews and then a community dialogue with over 40 leaders (organizers and directors) from people of color-led organizations about their existing efforts, interests, and needs to engage reproductive justice in their work. Center staff created political education curriculum and other tools, as well as provided intensive organizational coaching and strategy development, in response to the needs identified in this community scan.

From the beginning, participants pointed to the importance of creating a space where women of color could come together across issues and constituencies and create power through dialogue, which had felt missing from their organizational work. Building relationships among women of color in ways that some described as ‘falling in love’ proved central to the kind of power that BRAVE participants would cultivate and sow into their public-facing efforts – writing and sharing a political education toolkit, facilitating cultural work and producing a video as public testimony, and entering into existing reproductive rights and health equity coalitions to shape policy advocacy on reproductive health access.

## Strategies for Re-Imagining a Prefigurative Politics

### Strategy 1: Radical Homeplaces to Foster Relationality and Identifications out of Longing

In her essay “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” Bell Hooks (2001) politicizes the homeplace as the space in which black communities reclaim their humanity, their subjectivity in the face of racist domination and violence. For Hooks, black women’s caring and nurturing work in the homeplace constitutes “radically subversive” efforts toward their own and their communities’ political self-determination (pp. 383-384). Hooks expands ‘home’ from a site of domesticity where individual families reside to a kind of intimate enclave space (Squires, 2002) that is vital to fostering a people in opposition to domination. Homeplace was evident in women’s resistance to their exclusion from formal leadership in the civil rights movement (Robnett, 1996). Women’s caring and nurturing work revealed itself in the work of Ella Baker and others who built non-hierarchical collective structures for coordination and broad base-building in ways that Robnett (1996) sees as translational work to bridge “strategic politics” and “pre-figurative politics” (p. 1685).

We are BRAVE creates such a sense of homeplace, fueled by participants telling, claiming and interpreting stories about their experiences with sexuality, their sense of self, gender and gendering, abortion, birthing and parenting, navigating institutions, seeking support from family and friends (where they’ve found it, where it’s failed them), becoming politicized, becoming feminists, organizing, being angry, being scared, being proud, being powerful. Thus, intimate, safe, and bounded spaces that organizations create as mediating institutions are critical to a pedagogy for transformative change (Western States Center, 2014). In these spaces, BRAVE members break long silences, like when one leader shared for the first time in 26 years how she hijacked her father’s car to drive a neighbor experiencing intimate partner violence an hour into the city to get an abortion, and how this experience crystallized her own stance on abortion and gender justice in spite of her deeply religious upbringing. Women who had abortions – and faced down isolation, judgment, and structural obstacles in order to do so – name the emotional turbulence of their experiences and demand the kind of support all people deserve.

It is the process of building a collectivity that occurs in this speaking out of the truth of their lives that must be central to the conception of relationality in a prefigurative politics. This notion of homeplace exists not only in the quarterly convenings, in which Western States Center staff facilitated a concrete, bounded space for participants to come together around explicit purposes. It also exists via the ways BRAVE participants created new spaces in their own organizations and communities – through organizing additional people from using the BRAVE curriculum, doing their own community scans interviewing people about experiences about gender, reproductive health, and accessing care and support, and other efforts. Through their stories, BRAVE folks make connections between their own lives and others', and they find themselves articulating politics they didn't know they held as strongly until they had the chance to speak them. They deconstruct myths of the 'good girl,' the 'good citizen,' and the 'good liberal,' and in so doing they cast their own definitions of radical subjectivity and act on them in the face of being deemed 'unruly' by disciplining forces. This form of relationality is akin to a spirit of collective or oppositional identity in social movement theory. However, rather than implying a fixed or uniform subjectivity, identifications crafted in homeplace are manifold and relational, as we will discuss further with regard to coalitional strategies.

Relationality is a key element of the prefigurative in that it challenges us to recognize multiple and alternative forms of power. At times it is necessary to 'take power' via mass mobilization to leverage against the powers of the state and the market; this is the basis for the 'strategy' in strategic politics. But it is also important to 'make power' "by creating those structures within our organizations, movements and communities that model the world we are trying to create" (Smith, 2005, p. 187). Whereas the former is instrumental, a means to an end, the latter is generated by relationships and identifications within groups. Relationships built on making power are not formed only around shared experiences of subjugation; rather, identifications in homeplace are formed around the ways in which participants want to – in which they *can* and *need* to – be in relation to each other. They prefigure by "practicing again and again the ways in which we want to be well" (Alexander, 2005, p. 278).

Psychologists have identified the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and, in community psychology, a 'psychological sense of community' is a key indicator in the construct of empowerment (Speer, Peterson, Armstead, & Allen, 2013). 'Homeplace' helps us push this sense of belonging yet deeper. It is inflected with aspiration, a desire to realize oneself in a community of others. Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2005) alludes to this desire when she describes the condition of "be longing," or being about longing: "[S]omething called 'subjectivity' may be thought as an effect of belonging – of the affective, passionate, and political ties that bind us to others. Thus there is no separation between longing – to be with – and being" (p. 18). Thus, Carrillo Rowe widens the lens from the individual subject with coherent identity "to a sense of 'self' that is radically inclined toward others, toward the communities to which we belong, with whom we long to be, and to whom we feel accountable" (p. 18). This sort of belonging, grounded in a twinned sense of desire toward and responsibility for others, requires centering and valuing the relational labor of care and nurturance.

We are BRAVE operationalizes a sense of transformative community forged from making connections of accountability, learning and desire across experiences. Homeplace is a relational space; it occurs in containers – often organic, informal, semi-permeable – for how people form relationships out of desire. In We are BRAVE, we find these in weekend all-group convenings as well as the kinds of programs that participants create via their own organizations such as organizing groups, storytelling projects, a leadership camp for youth, and staff trainings. We can also locate homeplace in the new pathways participants have for coming together more organically. That people in BRAVE organizations – and also in the broader networks they connect with – have precedents and an

identifiable space (or people) to seek opportunities to come together around grievance, threat, or celebration having to do with gender, bodies, reproduction.

## Strategy 2. ‘Theory in the Flesh’ for Politics Derived From Bodies and Places

The second core element we emphasize in prefigurative politics is self-determination. ‘Theory in the flesh,’ as conceptualized by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1983), is a strategy of feminist praxis that anchors collective action in politics of self-determination. Feminist praxis is premised on a recognition that “sexual politics are central to processes and practices of governance” (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997, p. xxviii), that politics stem from interests in bodies (Eisenstein in Alexander & Mohanty, 1997). Theory in the flesh arises when “the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (p. 23). These ways of being in our bodies, the lived experiences that unite women of color feminists are the basis for collective consciousness, agency, and the building of alliances of resistance.

As a tool for critical inquiry, theory in the flesh also raises multiple levels of questions of who gets to decide, define, and determine our futures and our fates. Underlying the linkages between bodily and structural violence is the “ideological production of various hegemonic identities... on the part of state institutions and corporate capital” (Alexander, 2005, pp. 4-5). For example, narratives that pathologize the bodies of women of color reinforce prevailing cultural beliefs that they cannot be trusted to make responsible decisions. This justifies public policies and market practices from coercive reproductive control to systematic removal of children, exploitation of low-wage female workers of color, border militarization, and deportation.

We can trace this out in the history of abortion access in the U.S. The Hyde Amendment, which bans the use of federal funding for abortion, was first passed as a rider attached to the Medicaid bill in 1976, three years after Supreme Court Case *Roe v. Wade* guaranteed abortion as a legal right. With the Reagan administration beginning soon afterward, cutting public funding for abortion fit neatly into the newly entrenched neoliberal agenda of slashing government provision of public services while increasing its police power, deregulating industry while repressing labor power, and rallying around individual rights over shared responsibility. In short, conservatives are invested in banning access through public funding in specific (and abortion in general) because these bans provide discursive scaffolds for the bigger picture of austerity reforms (Political Research Associates, 2013). Part of the strategy is to maintain a monopoly on defining family values and regulating families in ways that reinforce historical racism, patriarchy, and economic disenfranchisement.

Meanwhile, mainstream reproductive rights advocates continued to rally around the slogan, “My body, my choice,” which circumscribes abortion within a neoliberal framework as an individual consumer right. This framing simply doesn’t work for low-income women, because abortion access is about the distribution of shared resources (Silliman et al., 2004). Thus, to build support for abortion access requires an ethic of collective responsibility for care in communities and valorization of the state’s role in providing public services.

In addition to rendering the forces and structures of domination available for critique, theory in the flesh also renders political claims that arise out of shared experiences in the body through organizing and building power around shared interests. In resonance with Freire’s (2000) *conscientización*, Moya (1997) indicates that feminist subjects need to engage deliberately critical stances and access to history through collective process in order to develop radical praxis that supports their participation in action. They do so by interpreting their own experiences and making linkages to build a shared critique, which they leverage into demands. Necessary to this project is to



construct what Anzaldúa (1999) calls a “new mythos, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave” (p. 102).

What women of color feminists bring to notions of praxis is grounding it in the body. It is a theory in the flesh from which emerges the framing of police brutality as a reproductive justice issue: “You deserve to parent your child without fear that he or she will be killed. Freedom from violence is a reproductive justice issue” (Repeal Hyde Art Project, n.d.). This political claim about police brutality as a reproductive justice issue functions by widening the frame from victims (and survivors) of police brutality to include parents and caregivers – mostly mothers of color. It is uncomfortable on two counts: first, that it is circumscribed in perhaps traditional notions of motherhood and, second, that it centers as political subjects those who take care of children of color, perhaps over the young people themselves. What do gendered and raced notions of motherhood have to do with political interests, and where does one flesh end and another begin? Yet there is a critical intervention that women of color make in invoking their reproduction, birthing, caring and loving. They invoke (their) motherhood to call for resistance against the state violence that violates that the integrity of their bodies and the bodies of their children.

This is one way in which theory in the flesh prefigures a politics *toward liberation* from interests in bodies. This claim also troubles the discreteness of one individual’s flesh versus another’s, grounding in the reproductive ties between parents and children, as well as in a notion of intersubjectivity among the collectivities voicing these interests. For reproductive justice activists, body sovereignty and bodily autonomy, conceptualizes as a claim to justice the freedom that each individual has to make decisions about their own body – how they understand, express, and make decisions about their own humanity, gender, sexuality, subjectivity, agency, family, community, and survival – very much in keeping with Carrillo Rowe’s longing to be with others.

We’ll illustrate theory in the flesh through the example of “The Reproductive Justice Timeline,” a participatory political education workshop that is a core piece of the We are BRAVE curriculum. It is intended to render reproductive justice issues, their historical bases and their present manifestations available for supporting participants in sharpening a critical stance on gender oppression and connection with their own experiences (Western States Center, 2014).

The workshop opens with participants invited to tour a gallery of historical events having to do with reproductive control in the United States. About sixty events, each with a large image, headline, and explanatory caption on a single sheet of paper, are taped on the walls around the room. Events include the impacts of reproductive health policies and practices on the bodies of women of color: forced sterilization and medical testing abuse in Puerto Rico and Native reservations in the mid-1900s, the targeting of urban communities of color for long-acting contraceptives like Depo-Provera and Norplant, and Rosie Jimenez as the first known casualty of the Hyde Amendment. There are also broader political dynamics about the vilification of communities of color and barriers to their self-determination: Native American boarding schools as cultural genocide, the proliferation of the ‘anchor baby’ trope in anti-immigrant movements, and the painting of the ‘welfare queen’ to vilify Black women’s bodies and justify cutting welfare, for example.

Participants tour the gallery in pairs and then reconvene to a large group to discuss their impressions. Some remark on their surprise at how recent some of the official abuses were, such as the criminalization of gay sex (in legal code as recently as 2003 with the Supreme Court decision *Lawrence v. Texas*), or their anger about histories they were not aware of (as the mass sterilization of women of color). Others note how old tropes and forms of oppression are constantly being reinvented to divide and repress our communities (‘anchor baby,’ disciplining

people for speaking their native languages in Native boarding schools historically and in public schools currently). Some draw connections between the ways different communities experience similar mechanisms of marginalization – such as divestment from wealth with colonization, slavery and contract purchases affecting African diasporic people, many communities with predatory home loans, immigrants with labor exploitation.

Following this discussion, participants name strategies of reproductive oppression as they relate to timeline events: political subordination, economic marginalization, stigma and stereotyping, violence, regulation of families, and control over bodies. The typology offers participants entry points and traction for naming their experiences, and it also lends additional validity to communities' historical and present experiences of oppression by placing them in a clear theory of power. This critical analysis of "the physical realities of our lives" is an important launching pad for cultivating a 'politic born out of necessity' via a framework for reproductive justice.

The timeline, in theory and in practice, supports the cultivation of critical consciousness. The discussion of historical abuses affects what we understand and name as justified anger and righteous indignation (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). What is important in a political education moment such as this is for a group to galvanize a sense of indignation into political will. From here, the workshop curriculum invites participants to name instances and forms of resistance they encounter on the timeline, in their present, and that shape their efforts moving forward.

To close, participants are invited to identify events that are on the timeline that connect with their own, their families', and their communities' experiences, and others that are personally and politically important to them. One format for sharing their own stories developed in We are BRAVE is a free-writing exercise based on the prompt "I am from a body that..." As this article's first author reflects in a blog entry about her work with a youth organization participating in We are BRAVE:

Being able to tell their own stories and to hear those of others is...an act of healing and liberation. Participants have the chance to name and then interpret their experiences on their own terms, and define what resistance and resilience are. They hear from others, learn about issues from different perspectives, and join their voices into a collective. (Lin, 2014)

Theory in the flesh prefigures through giving collectivities grounding for cultivating and asserting counternarratives that 1) center often-silenced voices in their own telling of first-person stories, 2) frame social problems in ways that render the apparatus of oppression available for critique, and 3) articulate values based on the longings that participants are acting upon in their homeplaces. We are BRAVE shared such a counternarrative publicly in a short video<sup>i</sup> featuring BRAVE participants (including the first author) sharing a collage of lines from their "I am from a body that..." poems. BRAVE groups use this video as a catalyst for holding conversations and workshops with other groups around reproductive justice issues.

### Strategy 3. Coalition as a Thirdspace Approach to Deepening Intersectionality

So far, we outlined two strategies in our template for re-imagining a prefigurative politics – homeplaces as intimate enclave spaces for 'making power' through relationality and theory in the flesh as a critical pedagogy to derive shared interests for justice from a critique of what shapes experience. Both strategies have their limitations. For example, Ferguson (2004) challenges romanticized notions of 'home' as a metaphor for revolution, because home is of a troubled and dangerous nature for many queer people. Homeplaces may be wrought out of shared bids for survival, but they are fragmented, provisional and fraught with conflict (Reagon, 1983). As well, engaging theory in the flesh as a labor of critique and a basis for political claims can occur on risky ground; we see this as

the framing of police brutality as a reproductive justice issue risks essentializing motherhood as well as supplanting victims of brutality with their mothers as political subjects. In the last section of this paper, we engage these tensions productively, as well as the need for nuanced approaches they call for, by discussing the multiple necessities of coalition.

We simultaneously need intersectionality and find it limiting. On the one hand, people experiencing oppression may come together in struggle, but their efforts reside in the taut space between a collective but potentially “ossifying” identity that brings enclaves together (Mohanty, 2003, p. 117) and the differences in identity and experience within groups often exploited via divide-and-conquer tactics. Intersectionality is a frame that centers the interactions among multiple aspects of experience – the parts of us that are raced, gendered, classed, and otherwise shaped by “interlocking” systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1983) – in analysis of issues and in strategies for struggle. On the other hand, the metaphor of intersectionality can be limiting; connoting the bringing together of two or more otherwise separate elements, it implies a pre-existing division of things undividable (Lugones, 2003). This metaphor lends itself to ‘doing intersectionality’ in organizing by examining how multiple systems of oppression come together on an issue-by-issue basis, rather than by embodying in critical analysis, relationships, and movement cultures a deeply felt and dynamic notion of interconnection – one inflected with desire and longing. To illustrate the contrast, we will discuss ‘coalition’ in two senses – first as a formation that serves an instrumental strategic function and second as a subjectivity.

A coalition in the first sense is “an organization of organizations working together for a common goal” (Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2013, p. 98). The ways we often see coalitions operate are as a manifestation of the limitations of instrumental strategic politics, reflecting the primacy of single-issue, self-interested organizing as conditioned by the non-profit industrial complex. Coalitions in this sense are usually outward-facing in that they are driven by bids to build shared power (power over) to bring to bear on decision-makers. Midwest Academy prefaces its organizing manual’s chapter on coalitions by warning: “Coalitions are not built because it is good, moral or nice to get everyone working together. Coalitions are about building power” (Bobo et al., 2013, p. 98). As such, challenges that arise include domination or co-optation by the biggest players, sacrificing principles and long-term objectives for the sake of obtaining short-term goals, momentary ideological confusion which can lead to long-term vision instability, and others.

This sort of coalition feels like the antithesis of prefigurative politics, but the very same ways in which coalitions are fraught formations surface critical opportunities for locating the prefigurative in the intersectional spaces of movements. For Bernice Johnson Reagon, the work to build projects of unified action across contested identities and interests means that “you don’t get fed a lot in coalition” (Reagon, 1983, p. 346). Intersectional work is critical for collective liberation, but coalitions require existing in a constant state of crisis. This because so many of the tensions that arise from seeking to hold both transformative and transactional power, seen through the lens of ‘doing’ intersectionality, live in coalitional process. For example – how do we craft winning messages that speak to the ‘movable middle’ but don’t throw your own communities under the bus? How can we engage both racial justice and economic justice, when tools for race and class analysis in strategic movement settings are so limiting? How do we invoke the vulnerability and humility necessary to organize reflexively when the politics of positioning militate against them? Organizers and leaders already negotiate these tensions within in their organizations and then find them amplified when multiple organizations existing in multiple networks come together to conceive of shared efforts. Responding effectively to these tensions requires self-reflection and deliberation to historicize and locate individual experience; Reagon (1983) reminds, “you can do wonderful things in crisis” (p. 355).

Thus, out of the above fractures and divisions arises an alternative way of seeing coalition; coalition in the second sense is as a *subjectivity*. Chávez (2013) draws on Lugones' politics of the present to define coalition as something holding the taut (third) space between the polar ends of utopia and instrumental institutional politics. Coalition is a vision in the present and a "practice that is oriented to others and shared commitment to social and political change" (p. 7). In this sense, coalition becomes a way of being through the development of what Carrillo Rowe (2005) calls coalitional subjectivities. Coalitional subjectivities are held by people who can't live their lives outside of the intersectionality that constitutes them, and also by those who actively work to "be longing" for relationalities and formations that work against oppressive power. When coalition is or becomes a part of one's being, one's subjectivity, it informs and animates every aspect of a person's living and organizing – how being queer and undocumented, for example, informs and animates every decision, every relationship, and every action as a constant negotiation. Because coalition animates and informs the way politics get enacted in the moment, it operates as an ontology, one that stems from intermeshedness and that resonates with be-longing as desire toward others.

In this sense, coalition is still contested and often fraught, and thus it requires the context of the other two strategies – intimate enclaves for fostering deep and intersubjective relationships as well as theory in the flesh as a critical pedagogy. But, here, coalition also emerges from a sense of self that is deeply intertwined with desire for and toward others. We'll end this section by illustrating via the We are BRAVE example.

BRAVE functions as a hybrid of coalition in the first and second senses. Functionally, it is a group of organizations coming together to carve out shared interests and collective efforts toward cultural and political change for reproductive justice. In convenings, BRAVE's political education pedagogy is grounded in relationality, storytelling, and building a shared critique of history. As well as, the group engages in the collective production of new narratives. For example, participants wrote and shared first-person narratives via free-writing poetry prompts and curated them into a video collage of multiracial and intergenerational voices sharing their critique of reproductive oppression and vision for reproductive justice, all stemming from theorizing on and through their own bodies. The publicly shared BRAVE video is the tip of an iceberg of much deeper cultural work; as such, it is an example of a pedagogy that bridges between 'power-over' and 'power-with' in organizing.

The subjectivities that were engaged are emblematic of coalitional ontology. We are BRAVE explicitly centers the leadership and political power of women of color (where such a space is lacking in Oregon), with keen attention toward the specific and interconnected experiences of trans\*, immigrant and refugee, Native, and youth communities. One of the ways BRAVE negotiates coalitional subjectivities is by naming the specific impacts of abortion access bans on particular communities, for example for immigrants whose bodies are raced and gendered as pathologically, irresponsibly fertile and who experience bans on Medicaid enrollment. BRAVE also might name the impacts on those whose images (e.g., Black women as "welfare queens") are thrown under the bus in austerity messaging about public dollars being used for abortion or anything redistributive. The BRAVE curriculum makes explicit these and other particular impacts of abortion coverage bans, in connection to broader reproductive oppressions. One clear example is pulling on the thread of forced sterilization throughout history and how it affected Native people, Puerto Ricans, people with disabilities, prisoners, and interned Japanese-Americans and thus links with occupation, genocide, eugenics and imperialism in raced and gendered ways.

The coalition of organizations in We are BRAVE built a strong sense of relationality, a shared critique, and a collective vision for reproductive justice by necessarily centering and consequently building coalitional subjectivities. Through connecting the three prefigurative strategies we highlight in this paper, participants and organizations

put ‘skin in the game’ for broader systems change on their own terms. BRAVE leaders and organizations brought their shared power and particular demands for reproductive justice to the table in two progressive Oregon coalitions (in the first sense) and moved forward a policy campaign that connects their values with the legislative process. They challenged coalition partners to deviate from traditional ‘insider’ advocacy with few leaders to a basebuilding approach bringing people from communities not traditionally represented in the political process into encounter with legislators to speak to their own demands. They linked their advocacy for reproductive health coverage policies with immigrant rights, anti-criminalization, and economic justice agendas and created messaging that explicitly communicated the connections among this broad platform.

In the BRAVE strategy, legislative advocacy is an important and also limited tactic, but legislative victories are not the end game. Rather, the end game is altering relations of power in the institutional, community, and movement ecosystems, one of the key – but least explicitly explored – tenets of community organizing (Bobo et al., 2013). BRAVE participants do this by forging coalitional subjectivities out of desire in the intimate enclave spaces that they purposively create. These spaces serve, on the one hand, as loci of self-determination and transformative relational power within communities and, on the other, to mediate the politics and participation that leaders bring to bear on the ‘strategic’ advocacy process – the way formal progressive coalitional partners operate, identify and frame issues, and shape the arena for public advocacy.

## Conclusion

Just as we see limitations to the metaphor of intersectionality while at the same time engaging its use, we do as well with the metaphor of prefiguring. We find the three strategies of homeplace, theory in the flesh, and coalition as interlinked in an exciting kind of template for re-imagined prefigurative politics. There is an important need for reflection, dialogue, and shared learning about the ways in which these strategies do show up in efforts of resistance to domination, and the ways we can sharpen them. The key ingredients for prefigurative practice, in our view, are a) cultivating intimate enclave spaces in their work; b) designing such spaces – through curricula and cultural work projects that surface a theory in the flesh – to facilitate participants’ cultivation of coalitional subjectivities and relational desire; and c) bringing the desires, political demands, relationships, and ways of seeing power to bear in key leverage points within the institutional, organizational, and movement ecosystems. Certainly, the form and nature of the efforts will differ based on context – what feels like home (and what complicates it), a particular theory in the flesh, what constitutes coalition (in both senses), and where opportunities lie for leveraging the power collectivities make out of self-determination in order to shape relations of power more broadly, all are contingent on subjects’ particular places, bodies, and experiences. We hope that activist scholars, organizers, and especially collectivities engaged in action around politics of their own survival will engage the template we offer as itself a point of departure.

Coalition – both in the strategic sense and as a subjectivity – is necessary to do the kind of change work we imagine in the world, but is only possible when we have developed our own radical homeplaces and collective understanding of history. Together, they support radical subjects participating in collective action to meaningfully and deliberately bridge between different realms of politics: the transformative and the instrumental, the utopian and the present, the personal and the political. In other words, using these strategies, radical subjects collectively engage again and again in prefigurative politics *and* politics of survival *in spite of* the violence and oppression they experience in their everyday lives and as a way to directly confront and dismantle those structures of violence



and oppression. The case example of BRAVE illustrates how collectivities grapple with threats to bodies and survival (historical and current) while simultaneously working to prefigure the world as they wish to see it. In our re-imagining of prefigurative politics, we draw on earlier threads in the discourse and the everyday work of collectivities in order to re-center prefigurative politics as a deeply raced, gendered, and classed struggle. We need a broadened understanding of the prefigurative, and we look to what emerges from women of color feminist praxis, in order to have a chance at interrupting oppression and violence, re-imagine more liberatory horizons, and to establish them in embodied practices.

## Notes

i) Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceCJOYsERQY>

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