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ALTRUISTIC IMPERIALISM: THE CO-OPTATION OF MUTUAL AID BY THE
NONPROFIT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

By

KELLY WALTZ

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New

York

2024

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APPROVAL

Altruistic Imperialism: The Co-optation of Mutual Aid by the Nonprofit Industrial Complex

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Kelly Waltz

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Altruistic Imperialism: The Co-optation of Mutual Aid by the Nonprofit Industrial Complex

by

Kelly Waltz

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This thesis assesses the role of the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC) in neoliberalism's material destruction of global community development and its exploitation of human benevolence. An examination of the institutionalization of high-profile social movements such as BLM and #MeToo demonstrates that the nonprofit industrial complex is built upon a misappropriation of feminist and liberation ideologies and practices, an insidious weaponization of our collectivist tendencies, and the systematic subjugation of mutual aid networks originally created and operated independent of systems of capital. The systemic and conceptual limitations of mainstream methods and the criteria by which nonprofit organizations' effectiveness is evaluated are contrasted with the holistic and qualitative approach taken by mutual aid networks and grassroots social movements. The survival of a non-profitized social movement relies on inconsistent financing from the state and wealthy donors, resulting in increasingly counter-revolutionary goals and values of the organization. By rejecting such monetization, solution-focused and community-led social movements preserve their authenticity, lending credibility to their demands for comprehensive and anti-capitalist structural changes. The inevitable demise of the nonprofit structure will be due to its fundamental refusal to reflect and meaningfully regroup, while mutual aid has survived by welcoming accountability and transformation. This thesis proposes a call to action for those seeking to "live their values" to assess their politics through an anti-capitalist framework and the principles of mutual aid, to challenge their individual and community's feminism and praxis, and to acknowledge what has been lost and what remains at stake under neoliberalism.

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Introduction: Neoliberalism and its Superiority Complex

Human nature is altruistic, anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin argues in *Mutual Aid: An Illuminated Factor of Evolution* (1902). Our chances of survival increase when infrastructure and communities are developed based on need and mutually beneficial cooperation. Mutual aid, the community structure of care networks comprised of individuals committed to meeting each other's basic survival needs with a shared understanding that official and/or state-backed systems will never be able to do so, sounds extreme and necessary as the United States dives deeper into the austerity politics and market deregulation of neoliberalism (Big Door Brigade 2023).

This "profits before people" style of governance has destabilized and worsened sociopolitical conditions around the world. Maintaining and expanding the US empire requires constant military invasions, international sanctions, and the decimation of millions. This proclivity for mass devastation comes at the expense of US citizens' tax dollars and quality of life. Rather than developing a universal social safety net guaranteeing basic necessities such as food, water, shelter, and medical treatment in an attempt to eradicate poverty, the government and its corporate backers have instead created a sector to sanitize its cartoonishly evil actions and commercialize human suffering called the Nonprofit Industrial Complex (NPIC). Nonprofit organizations are an ineffective and unsustainable substitute for functions that should be operated by an uncorrupted government to meet the ongoing needs of its people. Organizations often purport a philosophy that can be traced back to the tenets of mutual aid. Nonprofits reject "doing what you can with what you have" and operate from a place of scarcity and gatekeeping.

The first nonprofit organization in the US was the Peabody Education Fund, founded in 1867 with the noble goal of integrating white people and formerly enslaved Black people in

social and formal education and to foster reconciliation (EAC Network 2022). The gap between politicians' lack of political will to implement anti-segregation policies and the public's, including leaders of private industry, interest in welcoming these changes was filled by a donation from George Peabody, an investment banker and philanthropist, that went towards opening schools and funding scholarships and endowments. In the midst of reflexively praising George's selflessness and the infrastructural consequences of his impressive donation, is cause for concern that an institutional change of this magnitude happened because it aligned with the interests of a wealthy white man with significant financial and social capital. This is essentially the model of today's nonprofit industrial complex.

The social capital generated by Peabody's donation has only become more valuable in today's individualistic, power-hungry, and self-promoting culture. Good PR leads to financial gain, increased cultural influence, and an undeserved reputation of infallibility. Its major role in neoliberal economic policy requires that the NPIC be built upon and operated by a systemic rejection of feminist ideology, but it does not dissuade a nonprofit from claiming a feminist label. The relationship an organization and/or its members have to feminism is secondary to its structural purpose, which is to legitimize a distortion of the word, its history, and its praxis.

The compromised foundation of the NPIC makes it untenable as the mainstream avenue by which the 99% can access hope à la "American Dream" in lieu of community-building and/or improving material and social conditions. Liberation from neoliberalism is dependent upon a collective overthrow of its violent order and hollow ideology, an organized reclamation of humanity's irrepressible altruistic instincts and practices, and an unwavering belief that a better world is possible.

Mutual Aid: Philosophy and Practices

The rapid technological and social advancements of the 20th century generated a cultural optimism about what the new millennium would bring: flying cars, food pills, and interplanetary travel. Economic and scientific forecasts also warned of potential war, famine, recessions, and environmental collapse. While there was still time to develop public policy and business practices that could mitigate these risks, the US government and the increasingly rapacious private sector went in an accelerationist direction, foregoing our collective jetpack and robot dreams in favor of the feudal conditions now known as late stage capitalism.

Taking on the Great Recession, a (worsening) housing crisis, climate catastrophe, and a global pandemic with a belief in the mythical self-sufficiency of bootstraps ideology was not enough to stave off the unfolding loneliness epidemic and decreases in life expectancies and overall quality of life reported in recent years. If we are to learn from the past, we must look at it with honesty and not through the disempowering lens of “personal responsibility”. It was not a hopeful and motivated public that caused these failures of the system, but rather a system that was designed to fail humanity. New and worsening suffering is the only guarantee one can expect from a government built on and fueled by colonialism and exploitation.

The lofty dreams of yesteryear were not without merit. At their core, they presume a collectivist structure with communal goals of increasing the efficiency and sustainability of our systems and the autonomy and freedom available to the individual. Contrary to the cutthroat and egomaniacal work ethic encouraged in today’s capitalist hellscape, successful innovation is the outcome of the cooperative tendencies of human nature. Kropotkin theorized that the institutionalization of individual struggle and competition is the reason for societal regression. We see this institutionalization in the violent and punitive systems of poverty, including mass

incarceration and means-tested welfare programs. In his work as a geographer and sociologist, Kropotkin demonstrated that mutual aid, the system of cooperation and reciprocity, is the result of natural selection. In his words, “competition is the law of the jungle, but cooperation is the law of civilization” (Kinna 2023).

Care Networks: a Revolutionary Survival Response and Praxis

Mutual aid was borne of the communal practices that enabled Black and Indigenous communities to thrive. In times of crisis and violence, they are necessary for survival. Black and Indigenous people and their use of these liberatory practices have been criminalized after it became clear that they pose a threat to the existence of the state. The dilution of its fundamentally anti-colonial nature and the wrongful identification of Russian-born Kropotkin as the “father of mutual aid” paved the way for a white mainstream audience’s acceptance of mutual aid (de Loggans 2021). Misattributing this source of revolutionary power to white anarchists is one example of the extensive history of white supremacy’s theft and erasure of Black and Indigenous people’s significant cultural contributions, histories, and triumphs. Mutual aid, a non-western tradition, requires a commitment to the upheaval of white supremacy. In practice, white people and settlers must relinquish control, whether voluntarily or by force (“The Co-option of Mutual Aid”). Co-opting mutual aid without accountability is simply another form of racism. “Mutual aid is Indigenous lifeways and sovereignty; it is Black thrivance and power, which will outlive anarcho-communist theory” (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief 4).

Mutual aid acted as the collective survival response, not reaction, to the genocidal violence of colonialism. There is a shared understanding among those within a mutual aid

network that the oppressive systems people live under are never going to meet their needs, and that they can work together to create systems that will (Big Door Brigade 2023). Maintaining the integrity of a mutual aid network is extremely difficult as it relies on the network's organizing and operations functioning outside of the state's monopoly on natural resources and commerce. Private and state-backed entities restrict access to valuable relationships, abilities, goods, and services through the use of paywalls and surge pricing. In contrast, mutual aid networks strive to create sustainable and universal access to all essential resources.

This goal of decommodification is achieved through the practice of skillshare, which is the exchange of teaching, educating, and skills for goods and resources ("Let's Talk Mutual Aid" 3). This pragmatic demonstration of the fundamentally anti-capitalist philosophy and praxis of mutual aid highlights the limiting nature and failures of capitalism and the money economy. Communities' needs can be met by more people and new group dynamics through skillsharing. It expands the collective's separation and independence from the settler colonial state ("Let's Talk Mutual Aid" 3). Members understand that contributions of knowledge and resources will be unequal, and skillsharing does not need to be "equal" or transactional ("Let's Talk Mutual Aid" 3). An exchange perceived as unequal is made whole by recognizing and acting on the collective's ability to provide for the greater good simply because they can and want to. The coercive nature of money is in direct contradiction to the value a community gains from growing the material freedom and potential of the individual.

The sustainability of mutual aid comes from its structural independence, community development, and members' resilience. The focus of mutual aid is on what the movement and its people can do, centering the movement's autonomy and ability, in response to specific struggles and contexts (Spade 147). Horizontal organization and bottom-up strategizing improve the

community's ability to identify areas of improvement, allow for creative problem-solving, and encourage setting new and attainable goals.

Social Movements

Mutual aid networks are formed by people in desperate situations and the people who care about them. What starts as a choice to show up for those in need with no expectation of reward transforms into a communal responsibility to care for one another and to change political conditions. A social movement is created when a well-equipped mutual aid network and its message establish an ongoing presence and subsequent power within mainstream political and social discourse while not requiring their immediate approval. These movements are often met with institutional backlash and are deemed “controversial” in an attempt to maintain the status quo. Solidarity is how movements and their institutional goals survive these attacks, meet the threshold for serious consideration of acceptance by the majority, and eventually shape social norms, and thus establish widespread agreement. It is the unity that emerges when the shared need or concern that originally brought people together comes before any of their differences in background, need, ability, identity, or lived experience (“Solidarity Not Charity” 137). Similarly, inter-movement solidarity is built when overlapping goals motivate multiple movements to join forces and identify with one another's struggle. The commitment, or recommitment, to the people and goals of a movement improves internal morale, and can generate public interest and support.

At its core, mutual aid is the long-term commitment to the community (“Let's Talk Mutual Aid”). The ongoing development of community as a concept and within mutual aid

networks and the social movements they become is dependent on the critical work of building productive coalitions and alliances (“Unpaid and Critically Engaged” 258). To identify with a community and participate in its mutual aid network is to have locality, an authentic and personal connection to the work. Sharing a marginalized identity and/or struggle with a community creates a point of access for those in need to safely seek the support and resources of a mutual aid network and/or to initiate locality. Mutual aid asks for everyone to commit to the community through consensual contribution (“Let’s Talk Mutual Aid”). Regardless of skill or access to resources, membership typically requires a commitment to the ideological goals of the community, and an accessible cooperative act that reflects this commitment. The required action varies as mutual aid networks have varying purposes and take on different risks.

No Good Deed...

A successful mutual aid network meets the needs of its community, reveals the failures of the current system, and shows an alternative (“Solidarity Not Charity” 137). The history of successful mutual aid-based social movements is often dismissed until there is a change to the hierarchical status quo that subsequently neutralizes the threat that the movements previously posed. Our current system reserves dignity for the wealthy, which requires a growing scarcity of basic needs: housing, food, medication, a living wage, childcare, and more. In response to nationwide retributive right-wing policies and laws that leave people unhoused and internalizing the unattainability of affordable and safe housing as a personal failure, local mutual aid networks provide rental assistance, which secures ongoing safe shelter and prevents an opportunity for structural and interpersonal violence that is imposed on unhoused people. Unfortunately,

mainstream media benefits from both not covering a story of a group of anti-capitalists who successfully stopped an unlawful eviction of someone who simply needed their help to cover a story of growing homelessness and the public's and government's similar responses.

Mainstream (read: bad faith) criticism of mutual aid-based social movements is a reactionary defense mechanism of the capitalist status quo when faced with an organized threat to its oppressive structure entering public discourse and potentially gaining widespread support. The status quo, understood as the current material situation of existing power relations among political, social, military, and other issues, is packaged for public consumption by powerful and prevalent capitalist propaganda. The public is told a fabricated narrative of how things are, often with the overt or covert inclusion of criticism of anti-capitalist social movements, and is coerced into believing that this evaluation and opinion of the members, goals, and work of specified social movements, and the current institutions of social, political, and economic power, is normal, rational, and consequently, the only socially acceptable one. The “boogeyman” approach discourages public inquiry and education of a movement by developing a caricature of all bad things- slavery, poverty, starvation, even an unexpected rainy day, to the targeted political identity. Scary and lacking critical analysis? Perfect for the media-illiterate US public.

Capitalist propaganda builds credibility by balancing its bad faith criticisms of mutual aid networks and social movements with “praise”. It must do at least one of the following: 1) Obscure the movements' goals by being purposely unclear about what they are, or outright excluding them from their coverage, 2) Distort the physical/visible tactics and/or work of a group, or 3) Mischaracterize the movements' members, supporters, and historical figures. The “bad faith” model perpetuates the anti-revolutionary myth that a movement will garner more support from a larger number of people by adopting an increasingly meeker approach to its

requests for support and participation. Historically, it is a militant adherence to clear goals that piques a wider public interest and leads to more sustainable involvement by those who join.

The “praise” model, arguably more insidious, promotes revisionist views of historically significant revolutionary social movements and leaders. Martin Luther King Jr. promoted socialist policies and advocated for a powerful labor union movement. The ‘love’ he advocated for was unpopular with the government and capitalist institutions, but is portrayed as a palatable and passive acceptance of state violence. The Marxist-Leninist Black Panther Party and its advocacy for guerilla tactics to overthrow the US government has mainstream acceptance as a marketable aesthetic for a liberal pipedream of equality. Who needs the dictatorship of the proletariat when Beyoncé performed at the Super Bowl in a Black Panther-style harness that was designed with “girl power” in mind?

Excluding socialism, communism, and other revolutionary labels and political ideologies from the “praise” model allows for a hyper-controlled distortion of these movements, and reduces the risk of unanswerable public backlash to the messenger, including a newly-aware public developing a positive connotation with these groups, both of which can be blamed on the original messenger’s ignorance of the movement’s history. A hyperbolic misrepresentation of an ideology, or its “memeification”, can result in a growing public neutrality towards the group’s political association, which is not by accident. The opposite of attempted villainy isn’t guaranteed heroism, it’s cautious apathy. The consequence of a widespread mockery of ideologies that mutual aid groups claim to emulate and the related terminology on which their organizing relies, is a general sense of unseriousness and disinterest by the public, who do not want to risk their personal credibility.

Virtue signaling, an ongoing and interactive application of the “praise model”, combines all three elements to redefine a social movement in public discourse and welcomes an ill-informed audience and those susceptible to misinformation to confidently (and typically unwittingly) reinforce the status quo without questioning their current social positioning. Mainstream criticism of the grassroots Black Lives Matter movement, which was started with and operates by principles of mutual aid, includes exaggerating their protest and riot tactics, slandering members and participants as those seeking to cause mayhem for mayhem’s sake, and claiming that the movements’ goals of justice, such as police abolition and economic empowerment, are code for “kill all cops”, “white genocide”, and reparations that would effectively end society as we know it. This messaging is found on mainstream news’ chyrons, and is echoed and rehashed in your relatives’ comments sections.

Critics get to claim the moral high ground by supporting and reinforcing the mainstream misrepresentation of MLK Jr.’s legacy and message of nonviolence, and contrasting it with skewed analysis of the violence and property destruction witnessed at BLM protests. In response? A purposefully decentralized, horizontal, and non-hierarchical mutual aid network with goals of racial, economic, environmental, and social justice that organizes resources for those victimized by a violent police state, insecure housing, and other material realities of poverty, is put in a position to respond, typically without the option of litigation, to, and risk the legitimization of, the denigration of their movement, members, and their actions, while attempting to correct the mischaracterization of historical figures and movements past. This seemingly impossible task is not unique to the relatively new BLM movement. The mainstream criticism of, attacks by an increasingly fascistic organized right-wing on, and discourse among

those who are “just asking questions” about mutual aid-based, anti-capitalist social movements are unoriginal and serve a status quo that goes back centuries.

Neoliberalism and its Reactionary Creation of the Nonprofit Industrial Complex

The Reagan administration is heavily credited for welcoming the austerity politics and market deregulation that led to the development of the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, our reliance on the charity model, and soaring wealth and income inequality. The financial instability that people live with today can be traced back to the neoliberal project’s goal to “greatly limit or reduce the state’s ability to intervene in the event of market monopolization and/or destabilization” (Waltz 2). The tax breaks for the wealthy and powerful came at the expense of the social safety net and state-backed care networks resulting in the nonprofit sector filling the “space marked by the absence of the state” (Gürcan 2023). The most powerful and richest country on the planet, rather than creating a system that ensures safe housing, food, and medical coverage for all, opted to slash union protections and safety regulations for both consumer goods and labor practices. These massive political and economic changes included a change in social norms and attitudes that reinforced “white civil society’s impulse toward self-preservation” (Rodriguez 2016). The value of collectivism was replaced with state-backed rugged individualism and the exploitation of identity, identity politics, and feminism. The concept and creation of community were detached from locality, and working together to become independent of the imperial state was dismissed in favor of expanding the US empire.

Social Decorum

The identity as an American took precedence over the material reality of being American. Scrutiny and oversight of government policy was socially and institutionally discouraged. Publicly identifying as a person or family with struggles became more gauche as more people “fell through the cracks” and faced housing and food insecurity. The increasing scarcity of basic needs and a dignified life due to neoliberal economics made keeping up with the Joneses impossible, so people turned to social decorum. Instead of responding to a specific community’s identified needs, such as a town or neighborhood, there was a sweeping sense of competition with everyone, everywhere.

This culture of fear prevented the galvanization of a public experiencing growing inequality. There is no individual glory in being part of a community that meets its needs, but there is in maintaining the image of not struggling, and perhaps even having sympathy for those “less fortunate”. “Less fortunate” was simply a blanket term for those targeted by racism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination. What was deemed “acceptable” behavior, defined “decency”, and guided the development of etiquette was the exclusion of Black culture and poverty. It was tactless to discuss politics or money with the exception of praise of or aspiration towards wealth. This suppression of class consciousness among the 99% continues to perpetuate the disempowering and racist philosophy of respectability politics, places value on agreeableness, and ostracizes those who challenge the status quo. This arbitrary high-stakes system based on racist social norms reflects how easily mass incarceration, as part of the prison industrial complex, developed with minimal mainstream resistance (Rodriguez 2016).

The reinforcement of social decorum continues to come from individuals facing increasingly unreasonable requirements for a decreasing number of jobs, lessening their chances of financial stability and upward mobility. The attitude of not doing, having, or being enough

feeds the hustle culture seen today. Neoliberal policies supported the growing lopsided dynamic between employee and employer, and the ability to establish and sustain a small business. Industry giants buyout or bankrupt small businesses, leaving people desperate for whatever low-paying job is available, not even mentioning benefits. Communities used to find pride in their jobs because of what their labor gave them the freedom to do- have a family, buy a home, and the ability to make a better future for the next generation. This social and economic capital has been siphoned into taxes that fund a bloated military and big business.

Having lost the ability to purchase a home, have children, or create new wealth, people now turn to social networks to find control of their lives. The value is not in the experiences and growth of relationships, but in the opportunity to influence the people and environments in a person's life. This places an insurmountable amount of pressure on the impression a person leaves on others, and the reputation they are building. It's not a community when the goal is increasing an individual's social capital by excluding others on the basis of race, class, or gender as a way to soothe the unreconciled harm done by an economy, government, and social order that continues to devalue the human experience and the social and material support it requires.

Charity Model

The charity model is expected to bridge the gap between an insufficiently resourced person or community and a temporary supply or access to resources. Its role in neoliberal economic policy is simply a cheapened co-optation of mutual aid and its work with a social movement veneer. The charity model guts the meaning of community, and erases locality. The long-term commitment that a person or group has to a community is discouraged as there is no

long-term goal of substantive change or growth of a charity. There is no need for the reflection and connection of locality as people tend to choose a charity to participate in that is convenient and/or based on even the fleeting interest they have in the charity's mission. The mainstream structures of charity and volunteering romanticize and dilute the spiritual component of mutual aid, resulting in a misunderstanding of an individual's relationship with, connection to, and/or participation in a mutual aid network (or, "cause", when applied to the charity model).

The US government and aristocratic class's unabashed propensity for violence does not make an exception for care networks. Instead they undermine social movements and the structure of mutual aid with the counter-revolutionary system of charity and its materially insignificant outcomes. Mutual aid breaks "the binary of the "haves and have nots" with the intention to re-allocate for equitable access to resources, education, and needs" (de Loggans 1). It requires redistribution that is permanent and implemented outside of times of crisis. Charity, the short-term reallocation of resources, serves the oppressive capitalist structure by which resources are controlled and withheld and the oppressive social order capitalism perpetuates. Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic "confirmed neoliberal capitalism's inability to meet critical social needs" (Lachowicz). The goodwill that spurs people to join a mutual aid network and that sustains solidarity cannot fully flourish under capitalism. Rather than squandering this supply of self- and communally-motivated labor, capitalism relegates it to the flimsy structure of charity and the deceptively ineffectual role and practices of volunteerism. Charity is a reactionary structure that appropriates the aesthetics of mutual aid, but never claims a revolutionary label.

Mutual aid is both specific in its goals and structure while charity is vague and inequitable in its mission and membership. Mutual aid is powered by people and the contributions of those who wish to participate in it. Its existence in ideology, structure, material

goals and outcomes, and surrounding community environment generate interest and involvement. Regardless of popularity or mainstream support, charity will always be able to rely on propaganda, money, and dishonesty. Charity appropriates the aesthetics of mutual aid by appealing to individuals' desire to show that they care, with the results of their work coming second to potential reputation and social capital. The romanticized idea of community, a delusional and nostalgic reframing of mutual aid and a strong social safety net's past, is used to smooth over the disparities perpetuated by volunteerism. Locality is feigned by dreaming of "being a part of something bigger than one's self" as opposed to a person's natural inclinations for community directing them to the work and people of a mutual aid network. It is not done out of the kindness of people's hearts (de Loggans 3). Volunteering for and donating to charity is often referred to as "giving back", which makes sense given that charity operates on a "gift economy" ("Unpaid and Critically Engaged" 258).

Charity attempts to quantify the productivity generated by the amount of time volunteered or amount of money donated to determine a participant's gain in social capital. While a mutual aid structure encourages transformation of a group or cause, the charity model relies on a vertical organization and replicates a top-down power dynamic seen in private businesses. Volunteerism is unpaid care work. It is destabilizing to the individuals whose needs rely on it, and to the individuals volunteering who have limited resources and often need to stop their participation in a charity and redirect their time and energy to their paid work and interpersonal relationships. Unpaid labor by the individual and collective is a necessary component of capitalism. Workers have their wages stolen in countless ways with little recourse legally and/or practically, a problem only worsened by neoliberal economic policy. "Philanthropy is the private allocation of stolen social wages," as eminent American abolitionist scholar Ruth

Wilson Gilmore has observed. In fact, as Gilmore points out, the wealth redistributed through philanthropy is actually “twice-stolen – (a) profit sheltered from (b) taxes”. When it comes to the US’s “empire of charity”, one might even say thrice-stolen, considering the foundation of the American state on the theft of Indigenous lands – another genocidal enterprise that self-righteously framed itself as a charitable undertaking”. Despite the good intentions of those who volunteer, it should be concerning that the system’s attempt to meet the basic needs of people relies on the potentially inconsistent, voluntary unpaid labor of people who may not have any direct connection to the work or the people their work is serving.

Nonprofit organizations are always in survival mode and seeking donations. So, too, are recipients of the services and resources provided by a charity, creating the illusion of the “deserving poor” (de Loggans 2021). The idea of the “deserving poor” suggests that people should not be selective in their requests for support, and should instead be visibly grateful for whatever it is donors choose to spare them. Catholic charities and other Christian organizations often coerce people to claim or practice Christianity to gain access to charitable services and resources (WFPC 2020). The lack of locality within the charity model allows for organizations to be shaped by the white savior complex of founders, donors, and volunteers, foregoing long-term resources or skillsharing in favor of serving the ego (and taxes) of white people and institutions.

The disconnect between the creation of a charity and the population it aims to serve can result in the reinforcement of respectability politics and the idea of “palatability” - how can the people and marketing of a charity entice people to care enough to donate without painting an image of helplessness of the population or issue? Charities will not fix an issue, but their founders, workers, volunteers, and donors would like a chance to try to ease the damage of an issue. Even the most “mindful” volunteers with the most skeptical views of charities still act as a

cog in the machine (Smith 10). We saw with Peabody how much institutional change should not rely on the judgment of a donor or founder, regardless of whether they identify and remove the flaws observed in previous charitable organizations that served capital. As a structure, charity should not exist.

Military: A “Community” of Violence and Coercion

A group of people that skillshare, reallocate resources, have common material goals, and identify with each other and their work sounds like a community. However, this can also describe the US military. If charity is an inverse of mutual aid, then the military is a violent satire of it. It encourages enlistment, or the legally-binding agreement to join, by tapping into the heavily rewritten history of the military and its role in imperialism. The idea of “serving” one’s country by blowing up villages, stealing natural resources, and destabilizing the communities of countries around the world. The media tends to skim over the economic, social, cultural, and environmental damage done by the military given that it is the enforcing body of the US empire, backed by defense contractors, Big Oil, and the US government. Despite the fading promise of a dignified life, members of the military often fall victim to poverty and are told to find outside support from veterans’ charities. “Camo-washing” allows corporate sponsors, often financial services corporations, to publicize their love of the military while their business practices hurt veterans (Smith 2014). JPMorgan Chase, one of these corporate sponsors, has had to settle lawsuits for overcharging loans and illegally foreclosing on homes that belonged to military personnel (Smith 2014).

Military funding has grown exponentially in recent years, with public bipartisan support growing significantly in recent decades, both of which should be alarming to the average person. The military and 3-letter agencies are known to invade and interfere with countries developing socialist and communist structures, allowing the resulting destruction to serve as a “told you so” to anti-capitalist protesters, or proponents of collectivist ideologies and governments in the US. The goal of furthering the US empire by continuing colonial violence around the world is in direct opposition to mutual aid’s goal of growing individual autonomy and freedom, and the collective’s separation from state violence and resources. The long-term commitment to community displayed in mutual aid is not the same as the unfair and violent commitment to potentially dying for one’s country that those in the military are forced to make. Although there is a propagandized view of the military and service, maintaining steady enlistment has become difficult as young people grow disillusioned with what the military promises and the psychological, physical, emotional, and relational costs service can have on people.

The (coercive) allure of free college and VA health benefits is not as shiny as it used to be when we see the issues of homelessness, suicide, and unstable employment faced by veterans swept under the rug. The federal government’s non-stop growth of the military budget makes the ongoing destruction to the social safety net even more painful to accept. In order to secure the safe housing, advanced education, and expansive medical coverage that the government could guarantee everyone today, (poor) people are coerced into first participating in the physical violence of imperialism and war with their potential slaughtering of people and communities around the world viewed as honorable, and simply what they had to do. The transactional nature of military participation and action is deliberate, as is the dehumanization of non-white people and people in non-Western countries who are either targets or collateral damage of US invasions.

Racism, sexism, and religious discrimination are all used to justify the actions of expanding the US empire. Consent continues to be manufactured, accepting the lack of accountability for the actions of the US military and government. Bush stated that the invasion of Afghanistan was to protect “women and girls”, specifically their “liberation” and “dignity” as a humanitarian crisis was thought to be more effective at winning over, or at least placating, the political Left (Pacwa 4). The State Department demonized the burqa and claimed that the Taliban banned makeup and nail polish in a (successful) attempt to gain support for the invasion and to sow Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism. The propaganda permitted supporters of the invasion and violence to not interrogate how the US’s previous actions in the area may have impacted conditions for women and girls in Afghanistan, and dismissed any cognitive dissonance for those comparing the conditions to the oppression put upon women and girls, especially women and girls of Color, in the United States.

Right along with the military are non-governmental organizations (NGO), nonprofit organizations that provide a way for the US to invade and establish a presence in other countries under the guise of charity. The line between charity and military, and volunteer and soldier, have blurred as the directive of both projects is to grow the presence and control of the US abroad. The military uses NGOs as a “major vehicle for counterinsurgency and intelligence” (Gürcan 2023). The rapid expansion of NGOs, a specific part of the nonprofit industrial complex, demonstrates a global ripple effect of US neoliberal policy. The nonprofit-corporate complex emerged as the third pillar of the triangular structure of contemporary imperialism in the 1980s when many social services that were historically performed by the state became privatized (Gürcan 2023). The weaponization of both individuals’ goodwill and the charity structure itself allows for NGOs to act as another source of propaganda for the US empire by reporting on and

showing images of soldiers, NGO workers, and local people “working” “together”. This form of volunteering is capital as it serves the glorified image of the US, and provides more opportunities for the material conquering of people, cultures, and environments in the countries we invade. In Israel, the sustained development of various corporate, public, nonprofit, and military interests and needs is referred to as the military-industrial-nonprofit-complex, and is a product of neoliberalism (Shachar 2022).

NGOs often have goals of social, economic, and infrastructural “development” for the people and countries they operate in. Mainstream criticism of this aid is typically from the right-wing and rooted in isolationism and racism, identifying the people and culture outside of the US and Western bubble as inferior and undeserving of support or survival. This reactionary response to state-backed aid accepts the false scarcity of the resources and material improvements that it promises. The image of NGOs and the military sullies the history of anti-capitalist ideologies and movements centered on international, cross-cultural, and intersectional solidarity and what such movements have accomplished and are still capable of achieving today. Arguably the most important and visible ongoing movement and liberatory struggle is for a free Palestine. The US’ relationship, financial and military support, and shared appetite for brutality with the settler-colonial state of Israel demonstrates the shortcomings of the work and good intentions that are chewed up and spit out by NGOs and the entire nonprofit industrial complex.

To claim a middle ground is to accept the violence of the existence of the United States and Israel, and that is a large part of the problem with valuing decorum over progress, as seen with NGOs and their bending to state interests. While NGOs have an expectation to not act in a political manner, there are unchallenged Israeli nonprofits that illegitimately buy Palestinian land

while Palestinian and/or Muslim organizations are automatically deemed terrorist organizations (Kanji 2021). HaYovel, a US group of Christian missionaries recruits young Evangelicals to “plant trees, harvest grapes and prune vines” on land that belongs to Palestinian farmers as part of the “Greening Israel Project” (Prosterman 2022). NGO environmental work is not only ineffective against the damage done by the US military, the world’s largest polluter, but the planting of trees, grapes, and vines is particularly insulting when juxtaposed against videos of US and Israeli forces destroying the centuries-old olive trees of Palestinian civilians.

Groups like HaYovel go unchecked, despite their work essentially being the definition of “political activism” and hypothetically violating their 501(c)(3) status. The government instead focuses on quashing and criminalizing the organized opposition to its continued funding and manufacturing of weapons of war to Israel known as the Boycott, Divest, Sanction (BDS) movement. As a grassroots, non-funded, Palestinian-led, decentralized movement for freedom, justice, and equality, BDS calls for the boycott of purchasing Israeli goods, divesting from institutions, businesses, and communities that are involved with or support Israel, and for governments to recognize Israeli apartheid and act in accordance with international law (BDS 2023). Mainstream political discourse has historically promoted the military (and the US as a growing police state) as apolitical and thus, unimpeachable. Dissent and protesters are seen as underdeveloped and irrational reactions to the necessary or responsible actions by the state, which supports the feel-good objectives of NGOs, which serve to “convince people that tremendous inequalities of wealth are natural and inevitable” (Gürcan 2023). NGOs, as part of the larger nonprofit industrial complex, limit and package the revolutionary ideologies of dissenters to limit their reach, and weaponize in the long-term attack on anti-capitalist social and economic progress.

Contorting Feminism

The recent decades of neoliberalism welcomed feminism in order to weaponize feminism. Mainstream capital feminism embraces the US' white supremacist patriarchy and the continued growth of poverty. It exacerbates the disparities among women, people of Color, people with disabilities, and queer people. Women in the workplace, women in the government and military, and women in positions of economic and cultural power are celebrated by mainstream media and consumer brands as feminist wins that have bettered the world for all. Erasing the history of the feminist labor movement and its relatively intersectional nature provides us with a blank slate on which we can non-ironically celebrate a white woman CEO with no class analysis that would otherwise examine how she got there, whose support she has in the role, and who and what benefits from the structure and operations of the institution of which she is in charge. We also see this with the championing of people of Color in positions of law enforcement, military, government, and other institutions that were historically anti-Black and oppressed people by race or ethnicity. The respectability politics of neoliberalism encourages people to get jobs that allow them to make changes from the inside. There can be power in "representation", but we must be skeptical of those whose solutions to structural problems are focused on putting a new face on an old system as they are likely the same people or institutions that have the power to do so much more.

The Trump years showed the faults of what some call the "Empowerment Industrial Complex" (Alter 2023). Mainstream, meaning liberal, white, and wealthy, feminism champions a women's hustle culture that focuses on the corporate ladder and economic empowerment of

women while pushing the idea that change would come from the “soft power of cultural representation”, the failures of which we witnessed by the overturning of Roe despite its widespread bipartisan support across the country. This focus on appearances, social decorum, and virtue signaling among liberal institutions has ostracized those who have been sounding the alarm on wealth inequality, structural racism, and voter suppression. We are left with a #girlboss system of capitalism that has made bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom scarcer and the community of family an increasingly inaccessible commodity.

White feminism, an often more appropriate description of neoliberal feminism, is particularly dangerous to people of Color, those with disabilities, queer people, and other historically targeted groups of people because it attempts to identify as the answer to the violence of capitalism by pitying victims and treating systematic oppression as a temporary predicament of an individual that will one day pay off or be righted. This instinct for narrative is a byproduct of being raised in a society that prioritized the comfort of whiteness and white women’s image of innocence. Liberal feminism takes a losing approach of “try, try again” in its efforts to “reform current systems to achieve equal rights and opportunities to men” (Lecordier 2022). The violence of life in the United States under white supremacist capitalism has only ever been improved by the historical abolition of these systems, but that is not as charming or comforting a thought to those whose power is still tied to the preservation of these systems.

White feminism operates on principles of colonialism and encourages the appropriation of culture, struggle, and identity. The monetization of LGBTQIA+ Pride, co-optation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and erasure of disability are common ways that we see capitalism and white supremacy pick and choose identities and experiences to profit off of and strengthen the oppressive structures that caused the marginalization of these groups. “Work-life

balance” is no longer attainable for those outside the most professionally, financially, and socially secure of the professional-managerial class (PMC) and above. Industrialization created the “unproductive citizen” when injured or disabled workers could no longer work, and racism and homophobia have historically kept people of Color and queer people out of stable employment, and thus housing, medical treatment, and other communities, institutions, and networks that provide safety and ensure survival (Rose 2017).

The mainstream understanding and celebration of queer culture and history does not adequately capture how harrowing the AIDS crisis was and the extent to which mutual aid networks among LGBTQIA+ people are the reason why people survived. Many gay men who were discriminated against by hospitals, doctors, and official medical providers, spent their final months of sickness being cared for by lesbians, referred to at the time as “blood sisters”, who stayed next to them at the time of their passing (Mananzala and Spade 54). The continued violence against queer people, and particularly against queer youth, is an indictment of neoliberal capitalism and its corrupted use of identity politics. The mainstream acknowledgement of the housing and other discrimination, police violence, and family violence against queer youth is that of sympathy for the powerlessness experienced by youth, but does not extend that sympathy to adulthood. Mutual aid social movements do not limit their calls for safety and liberation to those under a certain age, of a certain background, or of a specific condition, and instead call for the dismantling of these structures that continue to conquer and kill us in the name of the US empire.

Methodology

Watchdog Nonprofits

The answer to how we measure the accountability and efficacy of a nonprofit is... another nonprofit. Two main nonprofits, to be exact. CharityWatch and Charity Navigator as “tools of accountability” within the nonprofit sector (Charity Navigator 2023). It may sound sensible on the surface, to those not privy to the corrupt nature of the nonprofit sector: those in a nonprofit are aware of the pitfalls and shortcomings of a nonprofit, as well as the ever-uncertain solvency of a nonprofit’s funding, goals and consequential measurability of outcomes. However, there are far too few of these organizations to be proactive in the larger operations of the nonprofit sector and are a less powerful reaction to the powerful reactionary nature of the nonprofit sector. Unsurprisingly, these watchdog organizations have a vertical, top-down power structure. Their work primarily relies on publicly available annual financial disclosure information that nonprofit organizations are legally required to provide, meaning that their work is responding to the previous year of an organization that can expect little to no immediate intervention in their operations.

CharityWatch, the smaller of the two, grades organizations’ specific metrics and the efficiency of their funding (CharityWatch 2023). Charity Navigator looks at a slightly bigger picture and measures the accountability and transparency of organizations, in addition to their financial health (Charity Navigator 2023). A “good” rating from an oversight organization can include bloated salaries for those on top who do the least amount of materially beneficial work and whose jobs are to continuously fundraise, requiring that the organization’s work appeases wealthy donors, and make executive decisions for the direction of the organization, and thus influence the extent of impact the labor of those below can make. This structurally devalues the input of those doing the material work of the organization, and often does not take any feedback

from clients/groups they say they are supporting. It may be difficult to follow-up with individuals even just a few weeks after they received direct services from a nonprofit. However, for an organization that is serving those who are unhoused, the surrounding statistics of homelessness in that city or community can be looked at and the relationship between the two can be assessed. The impact of NGO work in Afghanistan was measured by surveying local women with a general takeaway that “any international response, whether humanitarian, development or diplomatic, requires not just the input but the leadership of local civil society and women. Without it, there can be no lasting peace or security (Dorey 2023). Perhaps such a clear call for empowerment from those receiving assistance from local nonprofit organizations wouldn’t be welcomed by funders and big donors.

Measuring the effectiveness of mutual aid is democratic and collaborative, assessing how it best meets its community’s needs, and identifying areas to improve upon and to potentially expand. They are not restricted to a punitive structure unlike the liability laws and organizational bylaws that employers and formal organizations are subject to (which are often written and influenced by donors). These laws inform the decision-making of an organization, and to what extent it will stick its neck out for their mission and those they serve compared to the typical conservative approach, which avoids risks by excluding those in most need. Organizations that opt for the conservative approach may be those that require clients to have and show proof of legal immigration status before they can disperse resources, such as food, clothing, or funds. State protections and resources for those who are not documented are pitiful at best, meaning that the expectation of providing resources falls heavier on nonprofits.

Watchdog organizations can get their analysis wrong and risk legal liability by heavily-funded organizations, or provide legitimacy to mainstream bad faith criticism of an

organization whose reputation and work can still be salvageable when compared to a mutual aid-based movement's goals. Whether the work is done correctly or incorrectly, "accountability" nonprofits still serve the white supremacist agenda of the nonprofit industrial complex and its brand of neoliberal capitalism.

In Hindsight: The Nonprofitization of BLM and #MeToo

Black Lives Matter started as a grassroots response and an ensuing movement against police violence in the wake of the slaying of Trayvon Martin. It has grown from calling attention to the violence that Black people experience in every aspect of life in America, to including support for a free and liberated Palestine, free universal medical coverage, and solidarity with varying social movements that call for an end to discrimination and violence. The United States was built on anti-Black racism and violence, and has only ever found new ways to enforce this violence. Its resilience to the non-stop violence and slander the movement and its people face speaks to the strength of its deliberate horizontal organization. The Black Lives Matter nonprofit, however, shows how limiting the monied and capitalist structure can be to a movement's goals.

The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests included demands to defund and abolish the police. While social movements are not quick to support legislation as a means to liberation, the BREATHE Act reflected goals of Black Lives Matter protesters, and would have fundamentally cut down the system of mass incarceration in the United States (Dzhanova 2021). Rather than risk losing the movement's milquetoast institutional supporters, the BLM nonprofit eventually supported the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which clearly did not abolish the police. The bill further penalized police misconduct, excessive force, racial bias, and rolled back qualified

immunity (Dzhanova 2021). To contextualize how little it did to address community-based reform and police funding, it passed the House with the help of 3 Republican votes, but naturally did not clear the contentious Senate (Dzhanova 2021).

The movement took both mainstream and intramovement criticism when heads of the organization bought multi-million dollar homes and cited this as a win for progress. There were many other questions about where the organization was directing their massive funds that were donated by thousands of people, many of whom believed their money was going to housing and bail funds. Of course, the media coverage relied on anti-Black racist tropes and misogynoir, questioning the gall and judgment of the Black women in charge of the organization, claiming that this ruined the credibility of the entire movement, which is the takeaway of almost all mainstream criticism of Black Lives Matter. Private companies also touted their support for BLM, often with a hashtag, or even entire campaigns, dedicated to their business' commitment to empowering and protecting Black people. This co-optation is not the fault or responsibility of the movements' anti-capitalist members or supporters, but the welcoming by its 501(c)(3) leaders certainly made it appear that some parts of the movement had a price tag.

Today, the reputation of BLM is as polarizing as ever- and that's not a bad thing. In its first 10 years as a movement, it survived the social and economic disasters of a pandemic, recession, the Trump presidency, the current Biden presidency, a growing far-right white supremacy movement, substantial growth of the police state, and the continued realities of the violence with which being Black in America is treated.

The origin of the #MeToo "movement" is often incorrectly attributed to a Twitter hashtag from October 2017 and a handful of celebrities who spoke out about their sexual assault experiences, namely Alyssa Milano, (Waltz 1). In true white feminist style, the phrase "me too"

was originally a tool used by activist Tarana Burke in her healing work with Black and Brown girls and women who had limited access to support (Ewulomi 2023), and became an overnight slogan for the Hollywood, media, and political elite to co-opt a movement and finance a 501(c)(3) organization known as TIME'S UP. Its purpose was to provide legal and media support to victims of workplace sexual discrimination, such as assault, harassment, and violence, with a nod to the compounding violence and challenges faced by women of Color and the non-wealthy, non-famous women who work in media- women in a film crew, craft services, or maintenance.

The criminal legal system does not prosecute or convict 975 out of 1,000 reported incidents of sexual assault (Waltz 1). Sexual violence against women has historically been the norm. The work that Tarana Burke was doing before TIME'S UP was being done by mutual aid networks in many places around the country that do not offer survivors the social support services they deserve, and is shaped around community members understanding the risk to their safety associated with this work, including the risks of not participating. The nonprofitization of this care work, built by mutual aid with a collective goal of ongoing healing, brings with it the championing of VAWA, the Violence Against Women Act, that redirected the antiviolence movement to prioritize funding and to accept it through the Department of Justice, resulting in solutions focused on the criminal legal system and incarceration (Incite! 2007).

The first president and CEO of TIME'S UP, Lisa Borders, had to step down from her position after her son was accused of sexual misconduct (Waltz 10). Her previous experience was notably not in community care organizations or roles, but as an executive at Coca-Cola and former president of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). The second CEO, Tina Tchen, is the former Chief of Staff to Michelle Obama and was the Executive Director of the White House Council on Women and Girls. Gabrielle Sulzberger joined TIME'S UP as a

board member after her experience in private equity and as the previous chairman of the board of Whole Foods. For those desperate for answers, validation, or the semblance of justice, criticizing the involvement of any of these women seems counterintuitive. However, the history and connections that come with power can quickly become baggage that hinders both the mission and the work of a nonprofit.

Nowhere was this clearer than when the organization was tied to the Andrew Cuomo sexual harassment cover-up and the highly publicized smearing and rejection of Tara Reade, a woman who alleged that then-Presidential candidate, and soon-to-be Democratic nominee, Joe Biden sexually assaulted her in 1993 when she was working in Washington (Waltz 9). The organization's decision to not represent her in the media, or on any potential legal matters, was blamed on the organization's 501(c)(3) status. They claimed that they did not want to risk their status by their work defending Tara and her claims being deemed in violation of the requirements that, as a nonprofit, it not act in a political manner (Waltz 10).

They could have simply called her a liar, acknowledged the Biden campaign's donations to TIME'S UP, and moved on with their purported "work" of defending and supporting the unknown women exploited within the entertainment industry. However, the organization's decision to weave this narrative simply showed the power of celebrity, elitism, and how easily exploitable social movements are when a little bit of social (and political) capital is at stake. The same bad faith criticisms of women's liberation movements were used in this case, citing that this situation was "different" given the context of the 2020 Presidential election, the lack of evidence of the assault, and accusations of ulterior motives. Capitalism will always have a reason, whether an unchangeable external circumstance or a fault of an individual, to go against justice, and neoliberalism will substitute progress with tokenism. Community care networks like

the one that Tarana Burke was involved with will continue their work with news of organizations like TIME'S UP in the background reminding them that we are all we have.

Autoethnography

My ongoing political radicalization and feminist identity is greatly informed by my childhood experience with undiagnosed ADHD and depression and as a worker at a nonprofit organization that primarily serves survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Both experiences shaped my understanding of justice as an ongoing project, privilege, and the power in assessing what we owe each other.

Contextualizing the shame of unaddressed ADHD and depression that shaped my childhood in the insulated and idyllic Midwestern suburbia it was fostered in makes for a stark lesson in privilege, although I grew up around the terms “lucky” and “grateful”. I managed my social difficulties and peculiarities enough to maintain friendships, and my inability to focus and manage my time enough for an inconsistent academic performance that was still “good enough” at the end of each year. Unexplainable shortcomings became indictments of my character, making my efforts to improve all the more confusing. Reasons did not matter if they didn't come with corrected and improved social and academic standing.

Like most kids, and most kids whose disordered emotional and sensory processing is overlooked, I couldn't find the words to describe the ways in which things, and I, felt wrong. I was deprived of any sense of autonomy, agency, or the benefit of the doubt because the issues I unintentionally caused, and whose outcomes I also experienced, were a disturbance to others and

thus reason enough to dismiss my account of what was going on. In hindsight, I was feeling a sense of injustice that still hasn't been rectified.

I don't dispute how lucky I am that my childhood experience was free of the perils of poverty, racism, or other major forms of systematic oppression. It was actually the reminders of "how much worse it could be" that made me empathetic to struggles outside of my own- if this was the best I could do with the resources of a well-funded school and two parents with advanced academic degrees and "good" health insurance, what were kids with the same problems but no parental guidance or school resources doing? Diagnoses of ADHD and/or depression also greatly differ among gender and racial groups, with children of Color, primarily Black children, being underdiagnosed and instead seen as "problem" kids who are simply acting out and thus penalized as opposed to identified as needing different support from neurotypical kids. Young girls are underdiagnosed due to their main symptoms being mood- and focus-based, resulting in teachers, parents, or other authority figures relying on stereotypes of girls' not being academic-minded and "emotional". Data shows the long-term damage to mental and emotional health neurodivergence and mental health conditions go unaddressed and undiagnosed later in life with higher rates of crime, illiteracy, incarceration, and other environmental and health factors that come with poverty. "Feminism" and "intersectionality" were not in my vocabulary until college, but led to a number of "aha moments" for me once I began understanding them.

The ongoing social support I had, however flawed or misunderstood, challenged my internalized belief that I both lacked the power and ability to succeed, and was constantly on the edge of inflicting irreparable harm on others if I didn't curb the thoughts of self-confidence that broke through. I knew early on that my life and experiences were not the worst relative to nearly anyone in the world, but I was also painfully aware of where depression and ADHD had brought

me before, regardless of external circumstances. I didn't want anyone else to ever feel that sense of despair, or like they were incompatible with life.

My path to nonprofit work started with my unofficial role as the “confidant” among my friends and family growing up. I recognized and felt the paradox of both being a person whose judgment was not reliable (see above), while also being someone who people felt they could trust when they were in a vulnerable situation and felt scared, confused, or alone.

The feedback I have gotten from friends in my adulthood and from clients in my current professional role has been that they did not feel I made a value judgment on them for being in their situation or how they were currently handling or positioned in it. The practice of deliberately not reflexively making a value judgment on people is something that my politics inform and are informed by. It has allowed me to think of people and their situations critically and without centering my newfound role in and knowledge of the situation through their lens. Respecting the decision to share and to have a comprehensive detailing of a situation isn't being “nice”, it's recognizing that there is a value to allowing a person to be understood through the radically authentic lens of a human with inherent flaws and contradictions that do not invalidate their humanity, feelings, or placement in a situation.

As an advocate for anti-imperialism, Marxism, and socialism, the late political commentator Michael Brooks was one of the first voices I listened to and whose use of internationalism and the solidarity of the Global South have played a significant role in my political radicalization. His criticism and analysis of the effects of “canceling” people kept me from advocating for a reactionary and unsustainably inhumane praxis of immediate value judgment and arbitrary retributive punishment. Labeling someone as a “monster” and/or “irredeemable” serves to excuse us from the burden of assessing what justice is for all parties to

a situation, including whether the conditions of, and that allowed for, the situation are just. He much more concisely said “be ruthless with systems, and kind to people” (“The Michael Brooks Show”). While not dismissing any reported positive impact of my work, my role in the Nonprofit Industrial Complex deserves scrutiny and an honest assessment of its harm.

These conversations with friends and family are rooted in vulnerability and the clear and ongoing respect for that vulnerability. In both, I am not “solving” problems, but rather ensuring that someone can safely share their fears, confusion, or pain with a listening ear. Simply having that space and validation can equip people with the belief that what they want to happen, or know they have to do, is possible and that they are deserving and capable. In my professional role, these conversations are typically for someone to safely share that they are experiencing domestic violence or sexual assault. It may be their first time sharing what happened to them, or they are struggling with the belief that what they are experiencing is not their fault. Although it can be rewarding for someone to thank me because of how much better they feel after our conversation, there remains the reality of the conditions and identity-based discrimination that permitted such a situation to happen, to allow and normalize this violence.

Public discourse about who is to blame for domestic and sexual violence ranges from victim-blaming (who “gets” to be victim, or the idea that someone was “asking for it” based on dress or behavior), to calling anyone who has hurt a woman or child “sick” and needing to be locked up forever, or even killed. Both of these erase the fact that someone who perpetuates domestic or sexual violence simply made a choice, just like any other choice they make in their life, and they chose to disregard that person’s safety or consent. The nonprofit model unfortunately does little to structurally challenge the carceral response of the criminal legal system that the state has, leaving little room for transformative justice practices to be created and

implemented. Forgiveness and time away do not provide the healing or material resources needed for a survivor to safely move forward and develop a life that is not shaped around the avoidance of someone who hurts them, and does nothing to address the issues and needs of the person who hurts them, a person who is likely going to return to community with the same needs of a stable income, food, water, health and medical resources, housing, and social support. A lot can be done to prevent someone from choosing violence, and it doesn't have to be a time-out in a prison or jail in which they are dehumanized and face new violence and trauma.

The majority of my conversations include details of the situation that someone is going through as part of the process of finding temporary shelter. The biggest issue we face in that process? The lack of shelter availability and the ways that money from grants, federal and state funding, and donors is earmarked and how it fits into city planning. In short: those in positions of power have little interest in funding shelters for typically low-income people to temporarily stay in while they try to find safe and permanent housing, especially in a city and state that runs on real estate money and lobbying. Transformative justice for people in these situations would mean housing that is affordable and available so that they do not have to decide between staying in the same home as someone who has harmed them or sleeping outside or in the uncertain and often unsafe environment of a public shelter. It would include closing the gender and racial pay gaps and hiring discrimination that disproportionately impacts women of Color and prevents people from establishing the independence and choices that would make them safe in the first place. Rather than put the onus on individuals to “break the cycle” of poverty and violence, we could break the cycle that ensures it continues- and worsens.

The harsh reality of my role is that I, like many well meaning white women who moved to New York City from the Midwest or other parts of the country, pay my rent with money I earn

as a worker in the nonprofit industrial complex. I gatekeep shelter for often arbitrary reasons, requiring people share their most traumatic experiences with me, a stranger, and feed the passive acceptance of growing inequality and poverty that comes from the nonprofit sector's underfunding of resources such as housing, and its undermining of the state's ability to guarantee these resources. To work in the nonprofit sector is to deny how not deep the transformation is, and to not reconcile this fact with my anti-capitalist and collectivist politics (Spade 2023).

My existence in this role is also arguably an act of gentrification- where mutual aid-based communities could come together for each other for housing, social support, and financial support, I and many other outsiders operate in an erasure of that system. All of this for what? Low pay, health insurance, PTO, flexible scheduling, the recognition that I am doing "SUCH important work" from those in more lucrative private sector jobs? The nonprofit sector hasn't disillusioned me from the idea that people care. There are countless people in my and other organizations who care deeply and believe in the mission of their work. They often have social work degrees and work experience with people facing unfathomable injustices. However, my job should not exist, and people should not experience the violence of poverty that nonprofit organizations are responding to, because the systems of poverty should not exist.

Results

Watchdog Nonprofits

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1984). Every structure created by the nonprofit industrial complex is inherently unsustainable and collectively

harmful. They are made and used only to expand the power of capital, and thus strengthen the US empire. Nonprofits are already a way for the wealthy and powerful to throw money at image-related issues that arise from the structural problems they do not wish to solve. The role of watchdog nonprofits is to pacify the public, and particularly those who “care”, by creating the illusion and arbitrary criteria of accountability. They reinforce the low standards of nonprofits and the negative consequences of this restricted work as normal and acceptable, which further feeds into the positive PR that large donors and founders are seeking from affiliating themselves with these causes, and protects the tax benefits that these donors gain from the nonprofits’ financial structure. The media and government benefit from the existence and role of large nonprofits, often those with a high-salaried and well-connected executive team, discouraging those who wish to see material accountability.

In Hindsight: Black Lives Matter and #MeToo

Any gain in resources or support for a social movement that is generated by its nonprofitization is not sustainable. Regardless of intragroup or individual members’ objections, to nonprofitize is to consent to immediately potentially lose credibility as its liberatory goals and fundamentally revolutionary work are undercut. If the goals of a movement are to grow the freedom and autonomy of the individual, and the collective’s separation and independence from the settler colonial state, turning to the state and the promise of “reform” is simply sabotaging the movement. The founding and inevitable demise of a nonprofit is due to its rigid, arbitrary, and punitive structure that rejects honest reflection and revolutionary regrouping. The survival and thrival of mutual aid comes from its accounting for and valuing of the ‘messiness’ of human trial

and error that fosters a powerful and transformative system of accountability, resulting in group resilience and adaptability.

The decentralized Black Lives Matter movement provided a widespread community framework, identifying the many issues related to anti-Black racism, discrimination, and poverty in the United States, while operating in local networks. The mainstream bad faith criticism of BLM, found in the government, media, the growing organized outwardly white supremacist right wing, and in public discourse, does not warrant a compromise in the movement's messaging. However, the negative material reality of the nonprofitization of BLM, namely the corruption of the movement's goals and community development, is inherent to the financialization and assumed hierarchical structure. It allows the media to focus on the shortcomings and alleged greed of its founders, both the misappropriation of funds and the negative press that accompanies it, and can discourage the growth of the movement among those whose values align with the organization and who would otherwise be motivated to participate and join. The success and survival of the Black Lives Matter movement today is not due to its nonprofit organization, but in spite of it.

In its brief tenure, TIME'S UP had few measurable successes, and an arguably negative impact on the mainstream understanding of and response to sexual violence. Its white feminist, and thus neoliberal capital feminist, messaging and use of resources were effectively a way to pad the résumés of industry heavyweights looking to define feminism among the masses, and establish themselves as fierce power brokers in the political and entertainment industries whose work and presence contributed to the historical feminist movement. Many who felt empowered by the rise of #metoo believed in the rhetoric that led to TIME'S UP, including the idea that ALL women's experiences of sexual violence deserve to be heard and survivors deserve unwavering

support. Although feminist discourse has continued to develop, and feminist movement work has continued, Time's Up showed that nonprofitization will protect the media, governmental, and financial powers that be, and continue the commitment to capital at the expense of justice, expanding the labor and social structures that discriminate against women who are disabled, queer, Black and/or of Color, and poor. "The goal is to sustain movements, not non-profits that support movements" (Incite! 15).

Autoethnography

Neoliberal capitalism's systems of poverty persist and are strengthened regardless of the effort, good intentions, or sacrifice of the true believers in the nonprofit industrial complex. "The path to co-option is often paved with the very best of intentions and the oppressed are often at first unaware of their own oppression" (Feldman 2018). There is no "perfect" victim, or someone more "deserving" of their basic needs being met than another person, no justification for leaving people unhoused, hungry, and without proper medical treatment in a city with thousands of empty luxury apartment buildings, and in a country with the resources to feed, house, and provide some of the best medical services in the world. Those of us whose values would otherwise lead us to mutual aid work often pursue nonprofit work and instead work in an industry in which organizations must beg, compromise, and compete for pay that comes from our principled opposition (Spade). The challenge to neoliberal capitalism and the nonprofit industrial complex should be as collectivist and widespread as possible, but must leave room for the interpersonal and intracommunity reflection for those attempting to align their paid work with their anti-capitalist values. The nonprofit industrial complex would lead idealists to think that we

can simply “convince” people to change, leaving out that what we are trying to change is a deliberate system of domination created and run by people who know exactly what they are doing (Meronek 2023).

Conclusion

Human nature is altruistic. We cannot co-exist with the existence of the US empire and its neoliberal capitalist structures, ideology, operations, or Nonprofit Industrial Complex. The US empire neutralizes the threat that liberation from settler colonial violence poses to its existence through an ever-growing global military presence, the violence of economic domination, and by deploying the systematic co-optation and erasure of feminist and revolutionary movements’ histories and work, also known as the Nonprofit Industrial Complex. As a relatively new academically-institutionalized field of study, Women’s and Gender Studies departments formally acknowledge academia’s sparse representation of these movements, and actively recognize the scholarly importance of and interest in this historically underdocumented and misrepresented work. Women’s and Gender Studies literature and its accessible distribution is an institutionally-protected method by which these movements and their work are documented and survive.

Careful scholarship on the history of liberation movements provides a blueprint to contextualize current political conditions and inform the ideological development of those approaching radicalization and activism. Counter-revolutionary messaging and the systems it protects will not be defeated by a heightened institutionalization of so-called ‘liberation’. Rather, the relative but not insignificant legitimacy of academia can quell internalized anxieties and skepticism of those who are already living under conditions that make them question our current

political and social order. This thesis identifies the arresting and nefarious redirection of liberatory thought that feeds the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, and seeks to empower individuals and burgeoning political communities, with the gloss of academic reassurance, to trust their collectivist tendencies and to develop goals of autonomy and freedom that resist capitalist restraint. Protecting the individual and community is crucial because, according to Kropotkin, “even the really revolutionary minded individuals, if they remain isolated, turn towards the Individualist Anarchism of the bourgeois” (Kinna 2021). This thesis recognizes the ‘messiness’ of the ongoing reconciliation of hypocrisies inherent to the experience and process of individual political radicalization, how social movements find success by continuing to work with and through this messiness, and the guaranteed failure of a movement, group, or government that attempts to ignore or work around it.

This denunciation of neoliberalism as it is exercised in government, social, and economic policy, and its inhumane Nonprofit Industrial Complex, can be read as a call to action for the individual and widespread adaptation of a feminism that commands militant rejection of the oppressive structures and mainstream values of neoliberal capitalism and its role in spreading American imperialism. This interrogation of our praxis and the reclamation of our altruistic nature provide ideological and material support for, and normalize the values of, current and previous social movements that dared to believe and show that a better world is possible.

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