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RADICAL CHILDCARE COLLECTIVES: PUTTING
CARE TO WORK FOR POLITICAL RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Radical Childcare Collectives: Putting care to work for political resistance

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Childcare collectives have been organizing around the country in most major cities for the past several years. Their most immediate goal is to provide childcare for local social justice organizations. They are volunteer-based collectives organizing at the local level; however, many are part of a national group, the Intergalactic Conspiracy of Childcare Collectives (ICCC). Through participant-observation of an ICCC annual meeting and interviews with childcare collective members and childcare collective stakeholders, this thesis seeks to understand how and why childcare collectives organize. The research indicates that by performing carework at political meetings, events, and protests, childcare collectives build more inclusive and sustainable social movements. This thesis explores how the practices, policies, and principals of childcare collectives turn carework from an exploited and devalued labor, into a form of political organizing that confronts and challenges patriarchy, neoliberalism, and capitalism.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

WHAT'S A RADICAL CHIDLCARE COLLECTIVE ANYWAY?

In progressive and leftist politics it is the protest, the town hall meeting, and the political action that are the visible signs of discontent and resistance. These are what stand out in people's minds when they think of social change. From the labor movement, to the civil rights movement, to the most recent Occupy protests, this visibility has been an important part of changing political policy and attitude. What is hidden, however, what is obscured by these movements and protests is just as vital to political transformation and it has often been overlooked and undervalued by those theorizing and enacting social change. It is something that is absolutely necessary for political resistance and transformation: care. I'm talking about care as in the acts that are necessary for people to survive day-to-day and to do so in a way that gives them the energy and hope to continue to struggle against oppression. So rarely do we see images of the people who feed and house protesters, and we do not see at all those people who look after children so their partners, friends, relatives can attend a political meeting or action. These people and their actions are in the background, overshadowed by the visible, often sensational manifestations of "real" political action.

Here I want to draw care out into the open, particularly the work involved in childcare and to show how integral it is to allowing the continuation and reproduction of social movements and political resistance. As much as making acts of care visible, I

wanted to understand if they can be made central to a politics of resistance and transformation. I wanted to know what it might mean to integrate and institutionalize care in a way that does not isolate and exploit those who are doing it, and in a way in which it is not always happening somewhere else, somewhere outside the protest, the meeting, or the action. To draw attention to care in this way means not just politicizing care, but making politics more caring and implicating everyone involved in that process.

My interest in the intersection between political resistance and care developed out of my feminist political commitments as well as seeing many women drop out of activism after having children. I also worked as a nanny for an infant which was an emotionally tasking and isolating job despite being rewarding at the same time. I started thinking about the necessity of social reproduction and what a focus on carework could mean for politics. This led to my involvement with a radical childcare collective for several years which allowed me to meet many inspiring parents, children, and caregivers who continue to push the politics of care forward in important and transformative ways.

So what exactly do I mean by childcare collective? I'm talking about a very specific model of organizing childcare in partnership with local grassroots and community organizations to provide childcare at their meetings, events, and trainings. The most immediate goal is to increase parental participation in political organizing. Usually the partner organizations are social justice oriented and are often organized by historically marginalized groups: women of color, queer and trans people, and low-income workers. The collectives refer to themselves also as *radical* childcare collectives because beyond just providing childcare, they seek to change the way carework is valued,

the way parents and caregivers are treated in their communities, and to build a multi-generational movement for collective liberation.

Over the past several years, childcare collectives have been organizing around the country in most major cities from San Francisco, to Austin, to Baltimore, to New York City. Despite being geographically disperse, they share many of the same organizational tactics and goals. They also share similar membership in that most of the collective members are young people in their twenties and early thirties who are not parents themselves. Many are also white, although racial diversity varies among the collectives and largely depends on the historical trajectory of the collective. Issues of race and racial diversity are discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

Members of childcare collectives from around the country gathered together for the first time at the 2010 US Social Forum in Detroit to discuss their goals and the challenges to meeting them. There they established the Intergalactic Conspiracy of Childcare Collectives (ICCC), a network of childcare collectives through which they could continue to organize together despite geographic distance. After that, the ICCC continued to meet annually at the Allied Media Conference in Detroit to organize children's programming and hold a Network Gathering which operates like a yearly report back for participating collectives. It was at the Network Gathering where I did much of the research for this thesis and more detailed information on these events is found in Chapter 3, my methods section.

Radical childcare collectives can organize together on a national level because they share a set of values and understandings about the role of carework in social justice organizing. I came to understand these shared ideals as a member of a childcare

collective myself, through conversations and interviews with friends and fellow organizers, and by engaging with the mission statements and other literature developed by the collectives. Radical childcare collectives believe that childcare should be performed by everybody, including non-parents, men, and even people who think they don't like kids. Childcare collectives also think that interdependence is a positive and necessary thing and that the only way to build sustainable projects at the local or national level is to care for, nourish, and engage a future generation.

Implicit in childcare collective organizing is the perspective that childcare is not necessarily a liberating thing- that caregivers are often exploited and exhausted, which can lead to resentment and unsafe situations. Childcare collectives believe that childcare has the potential for creating spaces of resistance and liberation. In other words, it is rife with potentials but the care must be intentional and crafted in such a way that it does not mirror dominant structures, like that of the isolated parent or the overworked and underpaid careworker. This means that affective organizing becomes particularly important. Figuring out how to care for not just the children, but for ourselves and each other, becomes one of the biggest challenges to continuing to provide collectivized childcare.

These are the kinds of things childcare collectives are working on, and that concern me as a feminist and anti-capitalist as well. They are concerned not just with supporting parents and children and communities, but in figuring out how the social reproduction around care and carework can be transformed into a revolutionary activity. They are positing that by building communities of care we undermine the tendencies

towards neoliberalism, individualism, and capitalism, and start to practice alternatives even at a time when alternatives are being met with opposition and violence.

Childcare collectives build these communities by working with an array of partner organizations. Some of these partner organizations are anarchist, radical, and revolutionary. These include worker cooperatives, transformative justice organizations, and anarchist conferences. These organizations are largely uninterested in political policy or institutional change, and do not make demands on the State in order to further their organizations' goals. However, at the same time, childcare collectives support neighborhood groups and community organizations working towards racial and economic justice that do use more traditional or reformist tactics. These organizations include immigrant rights groups, workers' rights groups, and an array of organizations which focus on community based issues like improving public schools and increasing access to housing. Their tactics are often community based and include protest demonstrations, holding town hall meetings, and meeting with elected leaders. These organizations make demands for change on multiple fronts and multiple scales. Childcare collectives do not see these two types of organizations as conflicting, but see them both as necessary to accomplishing just ends. In working with different kinds of social justice organizations, childcare collectives seek to make room for children and parents in all political struggles, and to bring care to the forefront of political activity.

It's important to point out that the childcare collectives I'm writing about did not invent the idea of childcare at meetings, nor are they even on the cutting edge of politicizing childcare. In many communities and organizations, including some involved in this research, childcare was happening all along. This is true for a lot of Latino and

African-American community organizing, which even if the community groups don't have formalized childcare, parents will bring their children to meetings anyway. This is in part due to the fact that many issues communities of color are fighting for- like improved housing, improved schools, and better access to community resources- are not alienated from their private lives and everyday experiences. I interviewed several people from childcare collective partner organizations, and the partner organizations from immigrant communities had been offering childcare long before they partnered with the childcare collective. Sometimes teenagers were doing the childcare, or organization staff members, or the parents themselves would take turns. In these cases, partnering with the childcare collectives did not necessarily change the way carework was valued, but took some of the burden off of the partner organization and parents when it came to coordinating and performing childcare.

There are any number of ways a study of childcare collectives could be approached, and I hope that in the coming years more academics and political theorists will become interested in these organizations. I believe they have much to contribute to a study of oppositional politics, and, as organizations, they could benefit from someone with an outside eye lending their analysis. Because of my personal involvement with childcare collectives, I am not necessarily an outside eye, but throughout this thesis I do my best to give the reader a cursory understanding of childcare collectives and why a political engagement with care should not be taken for granted. As a geographer, I approached this by thinking about place and space, and how childcare collectives create spaces of resistance. Most importantly though, I was concerned with the political

affectivity of care, particularly childcare and how childcare collectives use care as a tool for political transformation.

Chapter 2 is a review of academic literature that I hope helps the reader understand the academic genre I'm drawing upon, which is mostly critical, radical, and feminist geography. This literature does more than explain the discipline within which I'm writing; it also contextualizes the political struggles of childcare collectives. It discusses the political climate childcare collectives are organizing within, particularly neoliberal capitalism which continues to commodify, privatize, and devalue carework. I also draw on literature that provides a framework for understanding childcare collectives' strategies and tactics. As much as possible, I attempt to let the information I gathered about childcare collectives drive this framework, rather than bringing a preconceived framework to the analysis. I believe that childcare collectives draw on a feminist care ethics and affinity politics to help them mobilize caring actions and put them to use for political transformation. Throughout the thesis, I will refer back to these frameworks and expand and deepen them as they are put into conversation with specific tactics and actions of childcare collectives.

Chapter 3 is my methods section in which I outline my research questions and the ways in which I addressed these questions. It gives specific details on how I conducted my interviews and participant-observation. I also use this chapter to reflect on the biases I brought to this project and how my position as both an activist and academic situated me with regard to my research subjects.

Chapter 4 is the first of three analysis chapters in which I attempt to explain how and why childcare collectives organize the way they do and why it matters for a politics

of resistance. Chapter 4 focuses on the structure and organization of childcare collectives, particularly on their consensus based model, and how they rely on the national network of childcare collectives to learn and grow as collectives. I pay particular attention to how differences among collectives are not necessarily grounds for tension, because they are approached in a careful manner that attempts to understand where the differences come from and why they are useful. Collective members are reflexive about their organizing, and while they share political views and aspirations, they do not view their organizing as setting up a fixed program, but as a fluid array of principles and practices that address context-specific needs. To make this point more salient, I draw on a specific example from my research of how race and racial diversity are addressed by different collectives and collective members.

Chapter 5 focuses specifically on the way care is practiced by childcare collectives. As I wrote previously, childcare collectives do not view care as an inherently liberating act, but rather that it has the potential to be so, if it is intentionally integrated and practiced by organizations in a way that fosters interdependence and collectivized care. I discuss the particular practices and policies childcare collectives enact to accomplish this, and how these tactics could be considered micropolitical interventions aimed at challenging neoliberal and capitalist hegemony. I also discuss how these practices and policies can be both intentional and provisional at the same time in that they encourage caring behavior, but not in a way that forecloses other political possibilities.

Chapter 6 is about children and childcare, specifically what both have to offer politics more broadly. I offer some specific examples from my research of how childcare collectives create child-friendly, caring spaces at protests, conference centers, and

meeting rooms. With great frequency, my research subjects spoke about how the presence of children and childcare ignites the revolutionary imagination and fosters convivial political engagements that are often ignored or seen as apolitical by organizers. They also discussed the benefits of making care more visible in a public political setting, and I hope to show the importance of moving social reproduction, and the care involved in it, to the forefront of political agendas. Childcare collectives know that care is vital to life, and by making a politics of care central to a politics of resistance, political movements will become more inclusive, more sustainable, and enlivened with creative energy.

The final chapter is a brief conclusion in which I reflect back on this research and what it means for theorizing the connection between care and politics. I hope to both open up the possibility for further research on this topic, and leave the reader with some new ideas about how to construct alternatives to our current political and economic systems.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Presently, there are no academic works on radical childcare collectives. There is, however, plenty of literature on the social and political issues that childcare collectives attempt to address through their organizing. There is also substantial writing on the ways in which care and caring practices can be harnessed by political struggles for social transformation. The difficulty was whittling the theoretical frameworks down to those that would be most useful in understanding not just what childcare collectives do, but how they do it. Using a geographical lens helped in this process, and it became clear that some of the topics that most concern geographers are implicitly addressed through collective organizing around childcare, if not radical childcare collectives specifically. Feminist geographers were especially useful in understanding the intersection between carework and larger social forces like capitalism and neoliberalism, as well as how caring and carework can be used to challenge these paradigms and hegemonies. Furthermore, geographic literature on social movements, collective organizing, and affinity politics lay the groundwork for understanding how childcare collectives create opportunities and spaces for resistance.

It's useful to start off with a discussion of how terms like capitalism and neoliberalism operate in my research, and then discuss how care, carework, and social reproduction in general can be used to confront these forces. Then I will discuss what kinds of organizing processes and practices childcare collectives engage with to put the

political possibilities of care into action. This is by no means an exhaustive literature review, and I believe someone could successfully approach the topic of childcare collectives with a different set of literature. However, I hope to let the goals and practices of childcare collectives drive the framing of this thesis.

Neoliberalism and Collective Action

The move towards neoliberalism is much maligned by critical geographers, in part because it operates on a number of different scales with a logic that seems to permeate into the most intimate aspects of our lives. David Harvey writes that “The fundamental mission of the neoliberal state is...to optimize conditions for capital accumulation no matter what the consequences for employment or social well-being” (Harvey 2006, 25). Under a neoliberal regime, the free flow of capital trumps all other political and economic motives, causing “Sectors formerly run or regulated by the state [to be] turned over to the private sphere or deregulated” (25). This has important implications for political involvement, especially for mothers, families and caretakers. For instance, manifestations of this logic extended into social welfare in the United States, when in 1996 welfare was no longer a social entitlement, but instead something earned through participation in the unregulated market system. Welfare to work, or workfare, significantly limited low-income mothers’ ability to act politically because so much of their time and resources were caught up in working, finding work, or making ends meet (McDowell 2004). Under neoliberalism not only are “mutual dependence, self-sacrifice and care for others undervalued notions” but they are also actively discouraged in that those who volunteer their time political organizing, rather than working for minimum wage, should expect to experience negative economic impacts (146). This results in the

diminishing of “spaces available for voluntary or collective actions, spaces often, although not solely, associated with women’s actions” (146). The transition from welfare to workfare also came with an expectation from both the right and the left, that individuals and communities should pick up the slack and provide the social capital necessary for active citizenship (Staeheli 2003). This paints a bleak picture for low income parents who want to attend grassroots political organizing. This is especially true for mothers who often face the dual responsibility of work and childrearing. They cannot rely on the state to pay for childcare while they attend meetings, and many grassroots organizations lack the resources to provide the kind of care that would allow parents to be fully engaged in a meeting or action.

This portrait of neoliberalism’s diminishing opportunities for collective action, especially for mothers and caretakers is not the entire story, however. There has been much written about women’s and mothers’ political activism and the way they negotiate family, work, and political action. This is particularly relevant to childcare collectives because their mission statements say that they prioritize low-income women and mothers, particularly of color. While childcare collectives support organizations comprised of low-income women, many of these women and their communities have been organizing successfully without the support of childcare collectives. This is important for understanding that childcare collectives are not a charity that communities depend on, nor are childcare collectives the first organizations to politicize care for others. For instance, many mothers are compelled to organize politically because of threats posed to “family health and community survival”, and working class women of all races and ethnicities have had to be especially active and vocal to protect their communities from the effects

of capitalist economic growth and environmental degradation (Krauss 1993, 247). This kind of “activist mothering” and “community caretaking” does not essentialize women’s role in the community, but rather expresses the complex ways they make sense of their own activities (Naples 1998, 113). They understand their political organizing not as intrinsically tied to their prescribed gender role, but as a way to mobilize political power around their everyday lived experiences. By using everyday experiences to mobilize and direct political actions, these women and mothers are doing more than just meeting their basic needs. They are also challenging the rigidity of public and private spaces. By making their household needs a public responsibility they are deconstructing this long contested, but still salient, dichotomy. This is especially important for immigrant mothers who often are isolated in their home, not just because of domestic responsibilities, but because their precarious citizenship status makes them fearful of being in public (Boscoe, et al 2011). However, by focusing on the mother/children/community interconnectivity, they “develop strategies that allow the children and mothers as citizen-selves to become active participants in the present and future of their communities”, thereby empowering them to demand institutional changes that will improve their lives in all social spheres (162). By engaging in “political activism and advocacy work through their family involvement” (Boscoe 2010, 382), they are showing that for some people political change will only occur if the social reproduction involved in the family does not remain isolated in the home. This is the kind of politics on which childcare collectives attempt to build on and expand.

Social reproduction and care ethics

Childcare collectives may not be necessary for the collective action of mothers and families, but they do the important work of making involvement easier for parents and caregivers by expanding the responsibility of childcare from individuals to a collective. Furthermore, by highlighting the necessity of childcare, carework, and care more broadly, they politicize social reproduction and the care necessary to it in ways that challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism.

“Social reproduction is the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life”, and is therefore hard to pin down precisely, but necessary to its continuation is care for ourselves and each other (Katz 2001, 711). Care is a vital component of the regeneration of human life, and as Marxists would argue, the reproduction of the labor force. However, within neoliberal capitalism, this care is not a collective responsibility, but one left to individual family units producing an uneven distribution of and compensation for reproductive labor. This is clear with the retraction of welfare which has increased the privatization and commodification of social benefit services (McDowell 2006), which includes many kinds of carework, including homecare, eldercare, and childcare. As carework is subjected to the logic of the free market, it continues to be the most devalued and exploited kind of labor. This commodification and devaluation of carework was preceded by a long history of feminization of domestic labor and care taking. The work of materialist feminists shows how women’s work had to be degraded and unpaid in order to reproduce the social conditions necessary for male labor-power in capitalism (Frederici 2004; James 2012). However, as women of all classes moved more and more into the workforce, the need for paid reproductive labor grew. Without

government social services to turn to, families and individuals rely on low-wage careworkers. This kind of carework leads to the reproduction and exacerbation of racial and class inequalities as middle and upper class white families hire women of color and immigrant women to take care of their children, elderly parents, and household chores (Cox 2010). The physicality and citizenship status of the careworkers is used as an excuse to pay low-wages, offer no benefits, and dismiss them without due cause (England & Dyck 2012). Today the role of a paid, in-home careworker is a very precarious one indeed. It offers few protections, almost no union representation, and especially in the case of immigrant women careworkers, causes them to experience severe social isolation (Pratt 2004). Combating the undervalued and isolated aspects of carework is why childcare collectives “want to draw it into the open, recognize its true importance, and make it the collective labor of us all”¹.

Moving from the devaluation of care to the collectivization of care requires a new way of thinking about how social reproduction can be accomplished. Instead of thinking about it as being in the shadow of capitalist production, we can bring it to the forefront by engaging with theories of care ethics. Care ethics has recently become a popular topic among feminist geographers, and it is their work that informs me most here. Vicki Lawson has argued passionately for care ethics as a political and intellectual project. She says that “Care ethics begins with a social ontology of connection: foregrounding social relationships of mutuality and trust (rather than dependence)” (Lawson 2007, 3). She also contends that care ethics should not be seen “as a separate kind of relation, but as endemic to (potentially) all social relations that matter” (3). What she is arguing for is the centrality of care; that it is not in the background, reproducing social dynamics, but that it

¹ Quoted from a childcare collective mission statement.

is the social dynamic, and to harness it for political transformation would be truly revolutionary. She writes that geographers have a lot to learn from care ethics and that it has powerful potential for knowledge production. Care ethics can help researchers “relate the general ideas of normative theory to concrete cases” (Lawson 2009, 211). This is especially true for radical geography where much of it “remains purely analytical and detached from the objects of its scrutiny”, but “care ethics cannot be practiced in the abstract because they focus on the specific sites and social relations” (211). Indeed, care is grounded in caring activities and the spaces in which those happen. Whether it’s the home, a hospital, a school, these places are social landscapes of care, or ‘caringscapes’ as some geographers have called them (Popke 2006, 505). Caringscapes are not necessarily discrete and bounded entities though, and could be cultivated in new spaces in order to create new, or transform existing social relations. This is what childcare collectives do when they set up a childcare space or a childcare room at a political meeting or social justice conference. By bringing the care dynamic into what’s typically considered a non-caring space, it can begin to transform and surround social relations.

There is another possibility for care ethics as it relates to the work of childcare collectives: creating political spaces that are playful, spontaneous, and convivial. People on the left have long been accused of giving in to cynicism and bitterness, victims of the crisis mongers who see politics as a way to explain not to imagine (Merrifield 2011). Play, however, nourishes politics, and as increased privatization leaves playgrounds, parks, and public spaces neglected (Katz 2004; McKendrick, et al 2000), it becomes a political imperative to create new sites where playfulness can emerge. Play “steps out of everyday life from within everyday life, and enters an ephemeral sphere of activity,

where it takes on its own magical character and often expresses freedom and joy” (Merrifield 2011, 22). Freedom and joy erupt spontaneously when play is allowed to flourish. This kind of spontaneity is unregulated by the market and incapable of being organized by institutions, and therefore presents revolutionary potentials. By embracing the possibilities of spontaneity we are not just opening ourselves up to new political actions, but new feelings, emotions, and affects. These affects can create and reorganize social relations, and lead us to care for those whom we previously had overlooked or ignored. For the purposes of this discussion, affect is defined in opposition to individualized formulations of emotion and “is thus more attentive to both the embodied and intersubjective dimensions of human feeling” (Conradson 105). This definition of affect can be used in subverting neoliberal ideas of individualism. As Nigel Thrift notes, “the move to affect shows up new political registers and intensities, and allows us to work on them to brew new collectives in ways which at least have the potential to be progressive” (Thrift 58). By harnessing affective potentials it is possible to show people why care and carework are necessary for a political transformation that is oriented toward cooperation and mutuality, rather than individualism and autonomy.

Although care ethics is an essential organizing concept of this thesis, it must be recognized that care can also be problematic. As was described earlier, carework can be exploitative, isolating, and degrading. It can lead to power imbalances and hierarchies, sometimes with those who care at the top, and sometimes with them at the bottom. As Rosie Cox points out, “some writers of care ethics seem to be a very long way from the lived experience domestic workers have of caring as employment and a set of moral economic relationships” (Cox 2010, 114). Silvia Federici also reminds us that “the

reproduction of human beings is the most labor-intensive work on earth” therefore it must be collectivized (Federici 2010, 288). To talk about care ethics in relation to childcare collectives is to talk about caring in a way that models the world they want to see, not in a way that reproduces sexism, racism, and classism, the very forces they are fighting against.

Putting Care into Action

As a theory, care ethics is useful for understanding why childcare collectives organize around childcare and why making care a collective responsibility is political. The questions still remain, how do childcare collectives put care ethics into practice, and how can theoretical political possibilities associated with care be put into action. These questions are important because making care ethics work in an organization doesn’t just happen, it must be fostered through organizational structure and organizational practices. There is no specific framework for discussing childcare collectives’ structure and organizing tactics; there are rather a series of ideas about collective organizing. One aspect of this has to do with how childcare collective organizing is inclusive and affinity based, drawing on a multitude of personal, collective, and placed based experiences. Another has to do with the reflexive and provisional nature of the collective structure, which is always open to the possibility of transformation and change, and treats power as limitless and collective.

To understand the meaning of inclusion, and what it means for organizing and political participation, I draw on the work of Iris Marion Young. She discusses some ways to make democratic organizations and processes more inclusive. Of particular interest for this discussion is her idea of inclusive political communication, which is in

contrast to the norms of articulateness, dispassionateness, and orderliness. First and foremost, is the importance of greeting, which “is a moment of opening to and directly acknowledging the others” (Young 2000, 58). Not only is it an acknowledgment of others, but it immediately implicates all participants in engaging in a new kind of relationship. Young explains, “when she acknowledges the other, she responds to the other and acknowledges an ethical relation of responsibility” (58). Both solidarity and an ethics of care thus become embodied in a meaningful political greeting. Another important aspect of inclusive communication is the role of personal narratives. The personal narrative directly challenges all three of the norms of political communication because it allows people to speak from their position, without having to meet certain rhetorical standards, or without hiding their emotion. This narrative form is especially helpful for finding commonalities or affinities, while respecting and learning from difference. “The narrative exchanges give reflective voice to situated experiences and help affinity groupings give an account of their own individual identities in relation to their social positioning and their affinities with others” (73), which is particularly important for childcare collectives as they organize across geographic space, as well as across gender, race, and class identities.

This brings us to the concept of affinity politics, which like care ethics, stresses that we are all interconnected and that our subjectivity is defined by our relationships with others. However, a politics of affinity is more closely associated with specific political tactics, like those that espouse non-hierarchical organizing and direct action (Day 2004). In this way, affinity “refers both to a mode of political organization and to a particular kind of emotive connection” (Clough 2012, 1673). A politics of affinity is

often associated with anarchist movements because it does not try to take power, but instead tries to create connections and spaces for relationships that are free from state and corporate intervention (Day 2004). It finds an “expression in a politics of place that involves the construction of a striking array of fluid and flexible places on the margins” (Larsen & Johnson 2012, 634). These spaces might be a community garden, an occupied park, or a childcare room at a town hall meeting. By cultivating these kinds of spaces, we are practicing “being together, or being-in-common” (Gibson-Graham 2003, 68), and orienting ourselves towards a common purpose, despite disparate identities, backgrounds, and positionalities. This “working together in disparateness” is key to a politics of affinity and is particularly utilized by radical childcare collectives on a broader scale (Day 2001, 36). Indeed, it is how they are able to organize in so many different communities and contexts, but still work together on a national scale.

In terms of organization, a politics of affinity does not call for a specific type of organizational structure, but is non-coercive and non-hierarchical (Day 2004). A politics of affinity leads to collective and cooperative structures where members have equal say, and where no individual can completely control the trajectory of the organization. Indeed, this is no easy task, but that is why a politics of affinity is necessarily built on “trust, closeness, respect, and equality” (Clough 2012, 1673). The goals of organizations based on a politics of affinity are “not to establish a fixed program for all time” (Springer 2012, 1616), but “to move away from theories that emphasize the achievement of irradiation effects within the system of states and corporations and to focus instead on the possibilities offered by the displacement and replacement of this system” (Day 2004, 719). These organizations “desire to express chosen ends in the means used to achieve

them” (728). This is particularly true in the way these organizations approach power. For instance, some women’s community organizations do not view power as “zero-sum” where “the only way to get more is to take it from someone else” (Stall & Stoecker 2008, 244). Rather, they create organizations where power is conceived as “limitless and collective”. This shows that political action doesn’t have to be “big, tough, and confrontational” (245), all incredibly masculinist descriptions of a political activist, but can be compassionate, open, and reflexive. Actions centered on the latter descriptors could be considered “productive direct actions” (Day 2004, 731), or in the case of childcare collectives *reproductive* direct actions.

To view power in this way is to open up a number of other political possibilities and tactics. It means that one does not have to hold power, or even appeal to those in power to challenge or change the dominant paradigms. To view power in this way also means acknowledging that under the current neoliberal regime, power is not necessarily exercised over us by a governing body, but rather we are compelled to govern ourselves in ways that promote individualism (Cruikshank 1999). When “the self is made into a terrain of political action” it, in part, supports the neoliberal retraction of welfare, and discourages ideas of collective responsibility or collective action (6). However bleak this theorization of power and governance may sound at first, it actually does open up political possibilities in that, collectively, we can act in a way that does not reproduce norms and discourses that are detrimental to our well-being and the well-being of others (Ettlinger 2011). Moreover, we can institutionalize or promote “counter-conducts” (550), or ways of acting towards, or being with, one another that directly confront normative power relations which perpetuate racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia,

age-ism, and able-ism. Counter-conducts are regulatory techniques that connect mentalities with practices by asking us to think and act differently as a form of resistance (550). Specific counter-conducts utilized by childcare collectives are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

This is by no means an exhaustive literature review of the issues touched on here, nor is it representative of all of the approaches that could be taken to understand childcare collective organizing and action. This merely gives an overview of the approach I've taken in my research and analysis. It is strongly influenced by feminist care ethics and by a desire to understand ways of political organizing that do not rely on a top-down approach to conceptualizations of political power and political resistance. I wanted to show the political hegemonies that dominate the current political terrain, how they are already being resisted by mothers and families, and what childcare collectives might have to contribute to that resistance. I am not creating a prescription for political action, but rather bringing to light their possibilities and limits in regard to childcare collective organizing.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS SECTION

I took on this thesis project as I was thinking about the role of carework and caring in political movements. I was less interested in understanding the nuts and bolts of how childcare collectives provide childcare, and more interested in what childcare collectives do for political organizing beyond providing a service. I was concerned about their political affectivity and what they bring to their partner organizations, communities, and notions of politics more broadly. Three questions guided my research. The first was: how do childcare collectives meet the needs of their partner organizations? With this question, I wanted to know how childcare collectives perform childcare, like where, and when, and for whom, and also what their relationships are like with their partner organizations. I wanted to know if these relationships change over time as the organization, community, and the collective itself changes. Second, I asked: what happens when political organizing engages with an ethic of care? As a member of a childcare collective, I saw how our collective put practices of caring for each other and a future generation foremost, but I wanted to know more about what care actually means to collective members and how practicing care for children can extend to care for others. I wanted to know if care can be harnessed for political action and transformation. Third, because childcare is a material practice that has to happen in a physical place where people are relating to one another, I asked: what do childcare collectives bring with them into a space? Childcare collectives create childcare and child-friendly spaces at

meetings, conference centers, and political actions, so I wanted to know from collective members, partner organizations, and parents if they thought the presence of childcare and children changed these spaces, and if so, how. In the following section I describe the methods I used to address these questions and concerns.

Research Process

My own experiences as a member of a childcare collective made the research process somewhat easier for me in that I had personal connections with, and insider knowledge about, childcare collective organizing. Several of the people I interviewed I consider close personal friends, and many of them I'd met prior to my research at conferences and events. Childcare collective members I didn't previously know, I met at the 2012 Allied Media Conference and interviewed in person during the conference, or over the phone at a later date. Using snowball sampling, I asked collective members to put me in contact with childcare collective stakeholders who included both partner organization members and activist parents whose children were cared for by a collective. Only one of these people I knew previously, the rest I interviewed over the phone without having met them in person.

My previous experience made it easier to identify research subjects, and meant that I knew what kinds of questions to ask, or rather what kinds of questions members of childcare collectives- and their stakeholders- would be interested in talking about. Particularly, I asked questions about their organization's political underpinnings, long term organizational goals, and the challenges they face in their own communities. My interviews were semi-structured, all of them varying slightly in length and the specific questions I asked. For the childcare collective members I interviewed, I asked, among

other questions, how long they've been a member of a childcare collective, how they first got involved, the challenges the collective faces in their community, their collective's long term goals, and if larger social processes affect their organizing. I also asked them to share personal stories or experiences, positive or negative, from doing childcare with the collective. For the parents I interviewed, some of the questions I asked were how becoming a parent changed their relationship to activism and organizing, if having childcare available makes a difference in their ability to participate, and how the organizations that they work with, who don't offer childcare, differ from the ones that do. Finally, for the partner organization members, some questions I asked were why they decided to partner with a childcare collective, the process through which they became partnered with the childcare collective, if partnering with a childcare collective has made a difference in parental participation, and if having childcare and children present at a meeting or conference has an effect on the event.

Having organized previously with parents and partner organizations, I took for granted a lot of my own knowledge. Looking back, I failed to ask some basic structural and operational questions about how collectives make decisions and how they interact with their partner organizations. My questions focused on how organizations are transformed by childcare collectives, but not necessarily about the details of their partnerships. Many of these issues, however, I address in this thesis by looking at childcare collectives' mission statements, expectations from partner organizations, volunteer guidelines, and other institutional documents used by the collectives. In many ways, these documents are more representative of an organization than an interview with

a single member because they are produced collaboratively by the childcare collective members.

It is possible that my personal experience as a childcare collective member led me to overlook or gloss over organizational issues. As I began thinking about organizing my data, I realized that I had a tendency to see only the positive, and an inability to be critical of the ways that childcare collectives organize. I hope to unpack some of these issues in later chapters because my research shows that while childcare collectives are far from having all the answers to address inequality and injustice, their practices and policies open up possibilities for rethinking resistance, and opportunities to nourish a politics based on care.

Interviews

In total, I conducted 13 interviews. Nine were with childcare collective members and four were with childcare collective stakeholders, including two people from partner organizations and two parents whose children were cared for by the collectives. Due to institutional protocol, I'm not able to reveal the names of the collective members or the cities with which they're associated. This is to protect the anonymity of the research subjects, the collectives themselves, and the organizations with whom they partner.

During the interviews people shared very personal stories with me, about themselves and people close to them. They talked candidly about often sensitive and triggering issues around gender, race, and class. Because much of the organizing done by childcare collectives and their partner organizations attempts to undo a long history of oppression, at times their tactics and strategies become contentious and fraught with emotion. Most of the people with whom I talked feel deeply connected to this work on a

personal and visceral level. Patricia Hill Collins' ethics of caring, an integral aspect to her conception of black feminist epistemology, is helpful here in processing and understanding these interviews, and the emotions that came up because of them. She explains that an ethics of caring involves three interrelated components including "emphasis placed on individual uniqueness", "appropriateness of emotions in dialogues", and "developing the capacity for empathy" (Collins 2000, 263). For the interview process, this meant not having to maintain a dispassionate demeanor, but instead allowing the emotions and personal narratives of the subjects to guide my questions and the direction of the interview. This helped me see that there was no way to remove organizational structure and practices lived experiences of their members, because these very experiences often led to their involvement with this work in the first place. This is not an easy dynamic to quantify, but throughout the following chapters I hope to let those experiences speak for themselves while also showing how intricately they are tied to the politics and practices of the childcare collectives.

I am incredibly grateful to the subjects of this research for trusting me with their stories and feelings, and I want to honor them by taking their confidentiality seriously so that more work like this can happen. Instead of using the collectives' names or the names of cities in which they organize, I've broken them down by region and used alphabetical pseudonyms. These regions are the Northeast, the Midwest, and the Southeast.

The Northeast was the region where I was able to collect the most interviews, not only because it's where I live, but it's also the region in which I organized while I was a childcare collective member. This made the region particularly accessible, and almost half of these interviews were done in person, in the research subject's home cities.

I call the childcare collectives in the Northeast Collectives A, B and C. Collective A had a total of four interviews, but only one with a childcare collective member. Collective B also had a total of four interviews, with three collective members, and Collective C had only one interview with a collective member.

Table 3.1: Northeastern childcare collectives

Childcare Collective	Members Interviewed	Partners Interviewed	Parents Interviewed
A	1	2	1
B	3	0	1
C	2	0	0

From the Midwestern US, I interviewed members from only one childcare collective, which I'm calling Collective D. All of these interviews were obtained in person at the Allied Media Conference.

Table 3.2: Midwestern childcare collectives

Childcare Collective	Members Interviewed
D	2

From the Southeastern US, I interviewed two collective members from two different collectives. One was in person at the AMC, and the other was over the phone. These are Collective E and Collective F.

Table 3.3: Southeastern childcare collectives

Childcare Collective	Members Interviewed
E	1
F	1

As you can see, the interviews with stakeholders are unevenly distributed. Most come from Collective A, and all were from the Northeast. I was also unable to get interviews with members in childcare collectives located in the Western United States, despite the fact that there are several childcare collectives from that part of the country, and members from these childcare collectives are organizing on the national level and have been doing so for a number of years. The dearth of interviews from this part of the country is due to several factors. One is the lack of personal connection I have with people in these areas; another is the fact that no one from the Western United States was able to attend the 2012 Allied Media Conference. I did attempt to email two collectives from this region, but did not receive any responses. With more time and resources, I would have liked a larger geographic sample of childcare collectives, and more interviews with childcare collective stakeholders. However, the collective members and stakeholders I was able to interview provided great insight into the similarities of childcare collectives, as well as some of the particularities based on geographic place and community context. Although not a comprehensive or completely representative sample, these interviews offer new information and new perspectives on an un-investigated aspect of social justice organizing.

Network Gathering

Although some childcare collective members had contact with one another, were sharing resources, and organizing together prior to the 2010 US Social Forum (USSF), that was the first time childcare collectives formally gathered to discuss their shared goals and challenges to accomplishing them. It was during that week, and particularly during a conference workshop entitled “Building an Intergenerational Movement for Collective Liberation: The work of childcare collectives across the states and the galaxy!” (Figure 3.1) that the Intergalactic Conspiracy of Childcare Collectives (ICCC) was born. After the USSF, the ICCC decided to continue to work together, sharing resources, and organizing a Kids Track for the annual Allied Media Conference (AMC) in 2011. Although I was not able to attend the 2011 AMC, I worked with members of the ICCC at the USSF and, as I began to undertake this research, I knew I could make the 2012 AMC an important part of my project. Along with organizing the Kids Track, which puts together activities like field trips, workshops, and scavenger hunts for children attending the AMC, the ICCC also organizes a Network Gathering (NG) for members of childcare collectives. Figure 3.2 is a description of the Network Gathering which I participant-observed for this research.

Collectives A, B, C, D, and E all had multiple members attend this year’s Network Gathering. Indeed, these collectives made up most of the participants with only one childcare collective represented that was not part of the interviews for this research. In total, there were sixteen (16) participants, including myself.

Figure 3.1: 2010 United States Social Forum workshop description²

Building an Intergenerational Movement for Collective Liberation: The work of childcare collectives across the states and the galaxy!

A gathering space for childcare collectives – and collectives to be – to discuss the work and the dream of building a truly intergenerational movement, aka a movement that will sustain itself across generations. This means doing childcare to support ‘adults’ who work today to resist systemic oppression and to create alternatives, and to illuminate, integrate and celebrate the political vision behind this work in our childcare practice.

From the nuts and bolts of cultivating a core collective and practicing imaginative play to the larger questions of: why is intergenerational movement building important, how is it happening, what more needs to be done, and what is our vision and strategy as a network, childcare collectives across the states are in virtual conversation now to create an agenda for a live meet-up at the USSF!

Figure 3.2: 2012 Allied Media Conference Network Gathering description³

Intergalactic Conspiracy of Childcare Collectives
OPEN TO ALL

The Intergalactic Conspiracy of Childcare Collectives (ICCC) is a network of collectives who support grassroots organizing by providing childcare at social justice events and meetings. We came together two years ago at the US Social Forum and continued building together for the AMC2011 Kids Track. Using this foundation, the ICCC Network Gathering will be a space to discuss shared politics and visions for ensuring that social justice movements prioritize family/kid-friendly spaces, intergenerationality, and communal care-taking. We will include conversations on how and why we do this important work, creative space for building resources, and general relationship-building.

This is our day to think through ways that childcare providers across the country can support each other in our work. We welcome childcare providers to attend.

² <http://organize.ussf2010.org/ws/building-intergenerational-movement-collective-liberation-work-childcare-collectives-across-state>

³ <http://amc.alliedmedia.org/tracks-practice-spaces-network-gatherings>

The NG was co-organized by several collective members and the activities were facilitated by several people involved in the organizing process. Prior to the NG, the agenda was sent out over the ICCC email list where specific activities and discussion topics were decided through a collaborative process over a Google document. Not all NG participants were involved in the initial organizing process, but everyone in attendance had the opportunity to review and comment on the agenda prior to the NG.

Specific NG activities and discussions will be touched on in later parts of this thesis. Figure 3.3 is an outline of the NG schedule, which was not followed precisely, but gives a good overview of what happened during the meeting.

Figure 3.3: Network Gathering schedule overview

* 10: 00- 10:30am	WELCOMING GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER GAME
* 10:30am - 11:00am	CREATING A SAFE SPACE TO SHARE:
* 11am - 11:30am	CHILDCAREISTAS/OS CHECK IN:
* 11: 30am - 12:30pm	IDENTITY, PHYLOSOPHY and PRACTICE
~ ~** LUNCH **~ ~	
*1: 30pm - 1:45pm	GAME
*1:45pm --- 2:30pm	HOW/WHY WE DO OUR CHILDCARE COLLECTIVE WORK
* 2: 30pm -- 3:00pm	GROWTH EDGES
15 minute break - stretch - cigarette/bathroom break	
*3:15pm -- 4:15pm	SITES OF CHANGE DISCUSSION
*4:15pm -- 4:45pm	NEXT STEPS & ANOUNCEMENTS
*4: 45pm – 5:00pm	CLOSING GAME OF ULTIMATE SILLYNESS

Prior to the NG, I received written permission from the main organizers of the event to record the daylong session. On the morning of the NG, I introduced myself to all the participants and explained my project. I asked if anyone objected to my recording the

session, and assured them that I would not use any names or identify their collectives. Everyone agreed.

Although everyone was receptive to and supportive of my project, shifting the role from fellow organizer to researcher proved awkward and even made me self-conscious. Given my history as a childcare collective member, I chose to participate in the discussion rather than remain a passive observer. I even spoke about my experiences in the collective with which I used to work. However, as a participant-observer, I also openly discussed how my position as a graduate student and academic has changed my relationship with organizing. Specifically, I'm less active than I used to be and thusly feel as though I'm perceived as more of an outsider.

This is indeed a complicated relationship for researchers to have with their subjects and their topic of study. It relates directly to the insider/outsider debate in ethnographic method. For example, prior to the NG, I conducted interviews with members of the collective with which I once organized. During these interviews, I thoroughly identified as an insider among my research subjects. However, during the NG, and during interviews at the 2012 Allied Media Conference, the participants who had not met me before knew me first as a researcher, and second as a collective member. This made me realize that the difference between an insider and an outsider is not so clearly defined. For me, "shifts in perception and relationship raised additional dilemmas that often led to the privileging of one social identity over another" (Naples 2003, 63). At times during the NG I was clearly an insider, commenting on how a particular organizing strategy worked well in my own childcare collective, but at other times I was ferociously taking notes I thought would be useful for my research, disengaging completely from the

dialogue. “Insider and outsiderness are not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed”, and as researchers our positionality is “constantly being negotiated and renegotiated” (Naples 1996, 140). Furthermore, what my research methods show is that it’s possible for the researcher to occupy the position of both insider and outsider at the same time, and that it is our relationship to the research subjects that determines if we are, at any one particular moment, one more than the other. This is why, throughout my research and in my data analysis, I tried to engage in reflexive practice. I wanted to both “[take] into account the contradictions of friendship in fieldwork”, as well as address issues of power and privilege that arose because of my position as an academic and researcher (Naples 2003, 37). Throughout the rest of the thesis, I attempt to present the data and information I gathered during my research in an honest and reflexive way. I also want the reader to understand that my presentation of the data, and the data itself, are necessarily informed by my own experiences with childcare collectives, and probably to a certain extent, my personal relationships with my research subjects.

CHAPTER 4

STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION: SHARING VALUES, EMBRACING DIFFERENCE

The best way to describe how childcare collectives organize is that they work “together in disparateness” (Day 2001, 30). They share similar goals and strategies, and particularly they share similar organizational structures, but each collective differs in important ways based on the communities they organize with, how long they’ve been a working collective, and their organizational capacity. The similarities are by no means coincidences, but developed because of shared commitments to non-hierarchical organizing, and because of meetings, exchanges, and resource sharing among collectives. The differences are not conflicting actions or beliefs, but rather different approaches in working towards the same end, or decisions which put more energy or emphasis on one aspect of their collective over another. What I discovered in my interviews, and during the Network Gathering, was that while childcare collective members certainly believe there are some ways of organizing that are better than others in achieving desired ends, they are open to learning from each other and cultivating a reflexivity about their organizing instead of holding fast to a particular model or ideology. Many collective members acknowledge problems within their collective, and often look to other collectives for solutions. In fact, one of the main goals of the Network Gathering is to provide a space to build relationships so that collectives can continue to be in conversation with one another. The expectation is that childcare collectives will share

with each other their successes as well as their failures and frustrations. This kind of open and honest communication involves “spatially extensive connections of interdependence and mutuality” (Lawson 2007, 8) that help childcare collectives around the country build a theory and practice that, in their ability to be self-reflexive and caring, are truly transformative.

The Collective Model

The collective model is shared by all of the childcare collectives in my research sample, including the six I interviewed, and one other collective that participated in the Network Gathering. Here, the term collective refers almost entirely to the fact that all of the members have an equal amount of power and decision making ability within the group. Decisions are made based on consensus, meaning that all members of the collective have to agree on a course of action before it can be formally put in place. This kind of organizing is common in radical and leftist collectives, cooperatives, and organizations. It involves rotating positions like meeting facilitator, note taker, and stack—the person who keeps track of what order people raise their hand to speak. It is designed to combat latent hierarchies like patriarchy and white supremacy in which people with white, male, or class privilege may feel entitled to talk over others or control the dialogue. This kind of organizing also tries to ensure that those with dissenting opinions are not marginalized simply because they are in the minority. During an interview, a founding member of Collective F explained their decision making process:

“Everything that the core organizers decide on is done collectively through consensus. We don’t have a president. We’re not a democratic organization. Every decision that we come to comes out of our hive mind.”

For her, the “hive mind” is the collective body that reaches decisions through the consensus process. It means that everyone must agree on, and be sure that they clearly understand a decision before it is acted upon.

To be clear about the childcare collective model, a collective member is synonymous with “core organizer”. Other people active in the collective are the volunteers who help out during the actual childcare, although they may also help in other ways as well- like setting up for events. Volunteers are people who want to support the work of the childcare collective, but are not yet interested in taking on the responsibility of attending regular meetings, maintaining relationships with partner organizations, and making group decisions. Many core organizers begin as volunteers, and then decide later that they would like to take on the responsibility of a core organizer. This was true for half of the members I interviewed.

Among the collectives I interviewed, their actual group of core organizers is fairly small, meaning there are only three or four collective members at any given time. Collective C, with eight core organizers, is the largest number of the collectives in my sample. This can partly be attributed to the fact that Collective C has existed for more than seven years, longer than any of the other collectives in my sample, and is also from the most populated urban city involved in this research. Often, the core organizers have “rotating membership” because as life responsibilities wax and wane, the need for time off becomes important, especially in smaller collectives, when maintaining relationships with multiple partner organizations and dozens of volunteers falls on the shoulders of only three or four people. Table 4.1 offers an overview of the number of core organizers

in the collectives and how long the collectives had been organizing together at the time this research was conducted.

Table 4.1: Overview of collective members and years existed

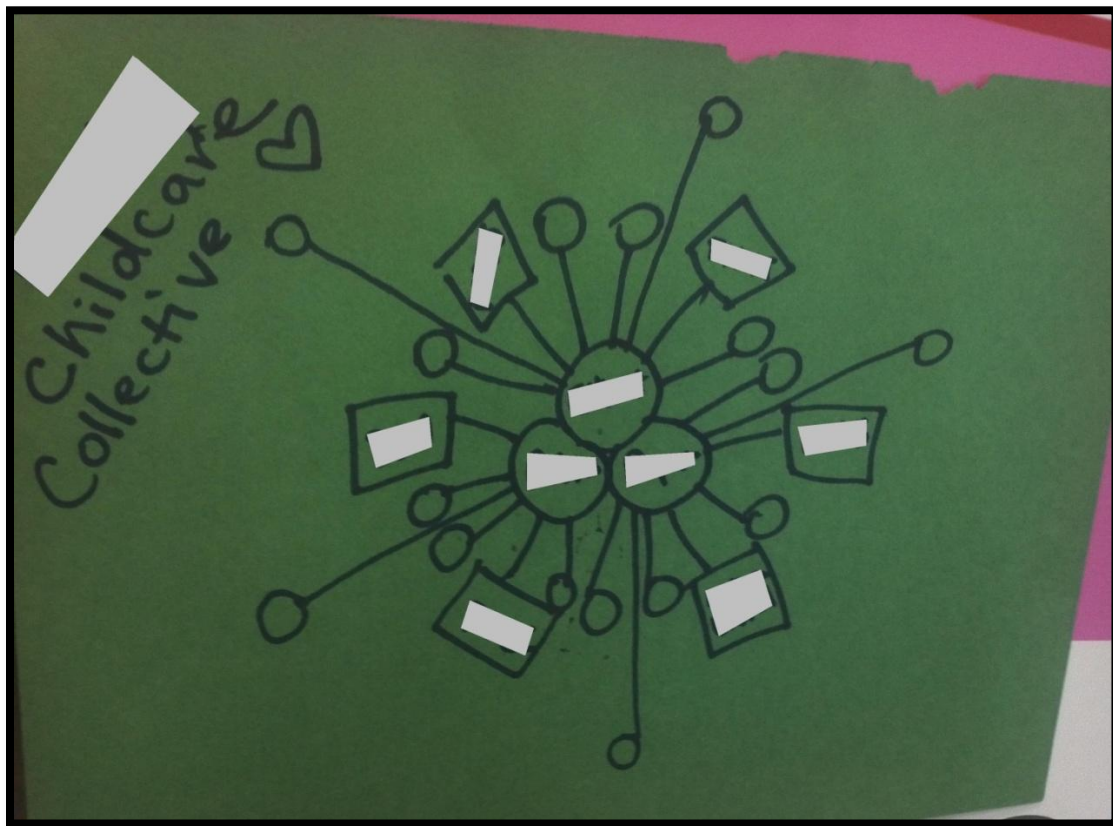
Collective	Core Organizers/ Collective Members	Number of years collective has existed
A	3	4
B	3-4	4
C	8-10	7
D	5	5
E	4	2
F	5-6	2

At the Network Gathering, members were asked during an activity called Growth Edges to name an “area where there’s room for growth in [their] collective”. Members from two collectives cited “core leadership” as an aspect of their collective that needs to grow and strengthen. One member spoke about challenges in maintaining core leadership, and the other was concerned about whether expanding core leadership would lead to a shift in collective values. The latter collective member recognized the “need for flexibility in hearing each other’s priorities as a means of growing the work” but worried about “opening up leadership while maintaining core values”. This exemplifies the conundrum of working with a small collective. The small core group makes it easy to make decisions and maintain ideological and political priorities. However, bringing in a new member could pose serious risk to the cohesion of the core. Even within radical and progressive communities, which are where all the childcare collectives draw part of their membership, there is a wide range of opinions about what kinds of issues take priority.

Even one new member could disrupt their “hive mind”. This worry may also contribute to the size of many collectives, which even after years of organizing remain small. This is why the national meetups at the US Social Forum and the Allied Media Conference are important for these childcare collectives. They offer the opportunity for people to meet and to engage with others beyond their often tight knit group and learn from others’ experiences.

In addition to the core organizers, the other two vital components of a childcare collective are the volunteers and the partner organizations. During the Network Gathering, each collective was asked to read their mission statement, and some participants drew representations of their collectives’ structures or goals. A member from Collective A drew a diagram (Image 4.1) that shows how these three groups -

Image 4.1: Collective A’s structure (names have been blocked to protect anonymity).



core organizers, volunteers, and partner organizations - are connected to one another. The three big circles in the middle represent the three collective members, or core organizers.

The illustrator explains the rest of the drawing:

“Usually [collective members] each have about two groups that we’re responsible for keeping in touch with, so I have lines going out to two squares from each of us. So it’s our responsibility to take care of the emails that come from these groups...to write back to them and figure out when they need their childcare ...Then the little circles coming out are sort of like our friends or volunteers we’re more friendly with because I feel like we all sort of tend to have the people we reach out to....A lot of the way we get volunteers to show up is through personal connections that’s why I drew lines going out to them.”

Two other collectives, Collective D and E, described themselves as being very similar to this model, and even used Collective A’s website when deciding how to structure their collective. This shows how heavily childcare collectives rely on each other and on the organizing work previously done by other collectives in building their own collective.

This also came through in my interviews as well. Collective E, as they were first starting to get off the ground, said that they asked members of Collective B, who also happened to be close personal friends, to send them organizational documents. Some of the organizational documents they received included suggested volunteer guidelines and expectations from partner organizations. Furthermore, at the Network Gathering, and in my interviews, many members mentioned a West Coast childcare collective that set up a Wiki on their website which acts as a database for children’s games and activities. People found this extremely helpful, and during the Network Gathering there was lots of discussion about setting up a more comprehensive Internet database for childcare collective resources, including information about how to start a childcare collective.

The ability to create connections through friendships, personal encounters, and Internet visibility is invaluable for childcare collective formation and continuation. In

childcare collective organizing, “the politics of affinity has involved creating non-coercive, cooperative, and grounded relationships through which such self-determinations are realized in practices of mutual aid that bypass the state and its institutions” (Larsen and Johnson 2012, 634). Rather than relying on the state, they build power and capacity through friendships, relationships, and networks of mutual aid and care. These kinds of affinities rely on positive encounters with others, and do not necessarily appeal to oppositional politics that position themselves against the state and against capitalism. Instead of reforming or revolting, they rely on the collective’s capacity “to express chosen ends in the means used to achieve them” (Day 2004, 728). These chosen ends vary from collective to collective, as each group cultivates its own identity through its members’ experiences and encounters with others. Here, differences among the collectives become important in how they develop and transform. Equally important is that, rather than reacting negatively to these differences, collective members use them in “the construction of new forms of relationships, institutions and action that enhance mutuality and well-being” (Lawson 2007, 8). How exactly these differences lead to the construction of collective identity is discussed in the following two sections.

“Working Together in Disparateness”

Working together in disparateness relies on shared values and beliefs, but it is also based on differences established through lived experiences. For childcare collectives, these differences are grounded in material struggles that differ, depending on the location of the political organization or movement. In childcare collective organizing, there is an “expression in a politics of place that involves the construction of a striking array of fluid and flexible places on the margins” (Larsen & Johnson 2012, 634). These places are

made fluid and flexible by embracing difference, and by practicing “being together, or being-in-common” (Gibson-Graham 2003, 68). Childcare collective members orient themselves towards a common purpose, despite disparate identities, backgrounds, and positionalities. They do not just presume sameness, they understand commonalities while learning from difference.

Perhaps one of the most visually compelling examples of working together in disparateness comes from the Sun Activity at the Network Gathering (Image 4.2). It shows how similarity and difference strengthen and nurture a capacity for community. The activity started with a giant paper circle, which is the center of the sun, and participants wrote in the circle the beliefs and tactics that all of the participating childcare collectives shared. We did this activity right after reading everyone’s mission statements, and we let the mission statements serve as a basis for commonalities. Some of these similarities were descriptions of whom childcare collective work supports, which included, “Focus on working with low-income women of color” and “Supporting parents/caregivers and children”. Other similarities had to do with the models of political organizing the collectives espoused, including “Volunteer led and run: not non-profits” and “Direct action model”. Also, there were some of the core beliefs that drove the organizing, including, “Communal care= vital”, “What we are doing is movement building work”, and “Intergenerationality is transformative to movements”. These similarities are also supported in my interviews and help establish the most fundamental forces guiding childcare collective organizing.

Next, “rays”, or triangular pieces of paper to be placed around the giant circle, were passed out and the facilitator asked participants to write “the more particular

Image 4.2: Sun Activity - commonalities and differences



localized things that people are doing that all come from this central light source”. It could have been something unique to the collective, or something new, or something on which a collective just puts a little extra emphasis. These ranged from how collectives engaged children to the role of race in the organization. In regards to the children in particular, a member from Collective A said that they “attempt to develop curriculum with kids that relates to what the parents in the partner organizations are doing.” A member from Collective E wrote that they “seek to be grounded in the queer community”, and a member from Collective B wrote that they are focusing on “creating spaces where people who don’t usually spend time with children do...and leave with more skills.” Members from Collective C wrote rays that had to do with racial issues in their collective. One member of Collective C wrote, “Childcare work provided by people of color as an intention.” He meant, and this was supported by other members of Collective A at the NG and in my interviews, that their collective is extremely concerned with making sure that their members and volunteers share identities and struggles with their partner groups. Many of the childcare collectives are predominantly white, which can pose difficulties, including cultural and language differences. Some of the challenges childcare collectives face around issues of race inside their collective, and with their partner organizations, will be discussed more fully in the next section.

The goal of the Sun Activity was to show that each collective, and indeed each collective member, is brings his/her own disparate and unique experiences to childcare collective organizing. While they agree on some central tenants, the differences are what really enliven the work and give it a dynamic quality so that each of the common principles of childcare collective organizing can be put into practice in ways that are

appropriate and specific to a certain situation or community. The sun's rays show that everyone has a different way of expressing and enacting the shared values and it's these specific practices that allow each collective to cultivate its own ethos. It also acknowledges that while all childcare collectives are engaged in the same work, this work is experienced differently by people with different identities and personal experiences. The sun's rays have a narrative force that "give reflective voice to situated experiences and help affinity groupings give an account of their own individual identities in relation to their social positioning and their affinities with others" (Young 2000, 73). The goal would be for people hearing these narratives to use the experiences of others to better understand the implications of their organizing, and then to inform and transform the political work they are already doing.

Race, allyship, and solidarity

Rather than seeing differences between collectives as oppositional, childcare collective members use the differences to inform and understand dynamics in their own collectives. This is made most clear in the way collectives deal with the issue of race and racial difference in their organizing. Because all childcare collectives seek to support at least some organizations comprised of people of color, discussions around racial oppression and racial privilege are often front and center. This is in part due to the fact that childcare collectives have a political analysis that is critical of economic and historical forces that continue to privilege whiteness, while marginalizing, criminalizing, and impoverishing communities of color. The emphasis on racial analysis is also due to the fact that many collectives are made up entirely of white people, and this causes some organizational anxieties. In my sample, five of the six collectives were comprised of all

or mostly young white people, most of whom are very self-reflexive about the role their collective plays in partnering with organizations of color, and what it means to be young, childless, and white while supporting parents and children of color. Most of the collective members I talked to do view this dynamic as problematic, and want to bring more diversity to their membership and volunteers. However, many collectives are still struggling with how that should be done, and what kind of priority it should be given.

Collective A is representative of childcare collectives that originally started as “white allyship” organizations. Their membership is entirely white and they partner primarily with people of color led organizations. In fact, their mission statement reads, “We provide childcare for groups in the [city] area who are led by mothers and families who are of color/and or low-income, organizing for economic and racial justice in their communities.” Furthermore, when I spoke to one of the three members of this collective, she cited her own white privilege and her anti-racist analysis as reasons for wanting to get involved in childcare organizing in the first place. She said,

“I went to an anti-racism for white people training, and they were talking about leveraging white privilege for social justice and organizing. One of the people there [said that] one of the things white people can do is offer childcare for people of color who are organizing, and I was like, yeah, I should do that.”

However, even this collective member expressed some reservations about having only white people doing childcare for predominantly children of color. During the Network Gathering she said that “recruiting volunteers with similar background to kids” and “having more racial diversity” in the collective were important things to her and fellow collective members. This was in part due to very practical concerns, one of which is being able to communicate with children and parents who speak only Spanish. No one in their collective, including volunteers, speaks fluent Spanish and this presented a

problem when they were doing childcare for an immigrant rights group. One of the children was hit by a ball during childcare, and none of the collective members or volunteers could clearly communicate to his parents what exactly had happened. Although she wasn't sure, she felt that this situation impacted the collective's relationship to that partner organization. Eventually that organization decided to discontinue their partnership with Collective A.

Although it's not clear how this precise situation affected the relationship between Collective A and the immigrant rights group, I did interview a former organizer who had worked with the immigrant rights group at the time when the partnership was discontinued. He cited several reasons for why the partnership was discontinued, including that the organization wanted to create more youth leadership opportunities, and one of these opportunities was having older youth look after the children. However, he also cited cultural differences as being a significant reason for the split. He said,

"I think everybody except one person in [Collective A] was white, and it wasn't so much a race issue as an image issue. A lot of people in the collective were pierced and had dreads, and didn't necessarily come to take care of kids with the cleanest clothing... They did a good job with the kids and were respected by the parents, but the new director felt like, which is true, that Latino culture, specifically working with people from rural communities that tend to be conservative, focuses very much on physical presentation... I've worked for many years in Latino and Black communities and there are some more conservative ideas of self-presentation on the whole."

Although he tries to shy away from race, and attribute the differences to culture, he later acknowledged during the interview that the racial difference was at the very least awkward. He said, "I think it can look weird because you have all these Latino mothers and all these white people with tattoos showing up to do childcare". Collective members also expressed their uneasiness with this dynamic, and in these expressions it's clear that

they are looking for a different way to organize, a way that does not reproduce the supposition that white people are “helpers” and non- white people are “in need of help”. When asked about the role of race in her collective, a member of Collective F, a predominantly white collective, said, “Sometimes it does feel like we’re doing charity work or we’re some kind of fucking AmeriCorps volunteers. Sometimes there are, not conflicts, [but] there can be uneasiness between our volunteers and the parents and I think it would be ignorant to ignore some race issues there.” Also, a member of Collective B, which has three white female members, and one female of color, said that the racial makeup of their collective “does not feel comfortable to any of us”.

Although there are very real and salient problematic issues with race within childcare collectives, clearly collective members are aware of these problems and are interested in alternative models to childcare organizing that do not necessarily rely on the benevolence of young, childless, white people. This desire for alternative ways of thinking about race and childcare organizing was particularly apparent during the Network Gathering. During the Growth Edges exercise, where collective members were asked to identify aspects of their collective in which they’d like to strengthen and grow, several collective members expressed their concern about racial dynamics in their collective, particularly lack of diversity. Three white members from Collectives A, B and F, broke into a small group to discuss among themselves how to address this problem. One thing that came out of this conversation was that they would like to look more closely at Collective C’s model, the collective that is the most multi-racial, and possibly bring that to their own collective.

So what is Collective C's model? While there is no specific term for it, it could be thought of as more a solidarity model than an allyship model. This is expressed more clearly by a member from Collective C in the Sun Activity. For her sun ray she wrote, "We have moved away from using the word 'ally' as an identity, and rather holding that everyone plays an ally role to each other at some point, and that's why solidarity is an important practice." It was not immediately clear what she meant by this, so during my interviews, I asked another member of Collective C to explain why they shifted away from terms like "ally" and "allyship". His answer was extremely enlightening and instructive.

"I think in a lot of the modern discussion of allyship there's a give-get, almost a transaction. To be an ally in one sphere means to get credit in another...you're exchanging your good politics to be let into a group...And I think we moved away from that because for a lot of our work we're working with primarily people of color and women led organizations, and that's primarily the makeup of [Collective C] as well...we're not doing this work in a way to rebuild a connection that's been lost, which I think is what allyship tries to do. You try to be an ally to a group that's disenfranchised. We're trying to acknowledge that we're actually part of that group."

The possibilities for thinking about childcare organizing in the way this member describes are very interesting. For instance, this model breaks down binaries between "supporter" and "supported". It shows that Collective C does not view themselves as outside a political struggle, coming in to be supportive of it by providing childcare, but as an integral part of that struggle in the first place. This is not to say that Collective C does not have white members or volunteers; indeed they do, but the point is that by shifting the way they viewed their relationships to their partner organizations, they became a more diverse collective. Rather than viewing their collective as trying to support or to be an ally to organizations struggling for racial or economic justice, they actually see their

collective as working towards the same ends as their partner organizations. They are able to view their relationship this way because their members share similar experiences and struggles as the members of their partner organizations. Their goal is not to work *for* their partner organizations, but to work *with* their partner organizations by providing childcare.

Part of the reason Collective C has such a nuanced and successful approach at creating a diverse collective is because they have been in existence for nearly twice as long as the other collectives and they've had a lot of time to learn and grow. It is not as if other collective members are uninterested in a more diverse collective, they are, and the Network Gathering afforded them a place to talk at length about this issue, and to learn from Collective C. In two interviews I did after the NG, a member from Collective A and one from Collective D spoke about how they were affected by the discussions around race and allyship. The member from Collective A said she was "feeling a lot of angst because we're all white and we work with a lot of groups that are comprised of mostly people of color". She went on to say, "I was feeling like I didn't want us to be like that anymore, so talking to people about how they transitioned out of that model was really helpful." The member from Collective D said, "I was really inspired by [Collective C] who said they grew out of the allyship model, and at first I was little put off, but you might think of it as like the soil that you grew out of. And I think that's important in not making our work one sided, or stagnant." This desire to always grow and change is what makes childcare collectives such unique organizations. They allow themselves to be transformed by other organizations, and even when this transformation may be upsetting, or "off putting", members are willing to move forward with new information in the form of shared experiences. The Network Gathering was really important for this because the

engagement “stimulated desires for alternative ways to be, and each of these desires operated as a contagion” (Gibson-Graham 2003, 30). Of course, these new desires and alternative models will not be built over night, or magically manifest themselves as soon as members decide they want to adopt them. The challenge for the other collectives will be to spend time and energy discussing what these models mean for their collective, and to come up with a precise model that feels right for their collective and partner organizations.

Conclusion

By discussing the structure and organizing techniques of childcare collectives, I’ve attempted to show how childcare collectives are interconnected through personal and political affinities, and that while they share common values and strategies, there are very real differences among the collectives that come from differing identities and lived experiences. These differences do not drive a wedge between the collectives however. The collectives gain strength from these differences because they do not view them as being in ideological opposition to one another. They acknowledge that the “awakening a communal subjectivity [does] not emerge from common histories or qualities but from practices and feelings” (30). Using these different practices or feelings to cultivate a capacity to modify their collectives is the kind of self-reflexivity enabled through this kind of organizing. Like the Sun Activity, it is also rhizomatic in the ways which different practices radiate from one collective to another, and how the common goals ground the collective, but the differences help them grow. This is further compounded by how childcare collectives build trust and friendships through the NG, letting affective connections and care ethics be foundations for political movement building.

What would it mean for all political organizations to operate like this? To think of themselves as open and reflexive organizations, with the ability to transform and grow out the soil upon which they started? It might mean that political organizing is not about finding the right answers, or the right solutions, but about always being open to the possibility of new ways of organizing. This does not mean we should abandon our political causes or strategies, but that reflexivity is a central component of building political alternatives. However, reflexivity requires specific sites and social relationships of care and caring that encourage the empathy to understand and the compassion to work together despite differences. How ideas of care and mutual dependence can be put to work politically in specific and meaningful ways is the topic of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

INSTITUTIONALIZING CARE: CARING THROUGH POLICIES AND PRACTICES

To say that childcare collectives institutionalize care is not to say that they are enacting large-scale, top-down policies and practices that attempt to impose a doctrine of care on all political subjects, nor is it to say that childcare collectives are seeking to replace our current state-run institutions with new care-based ones. Instead, by institutionalize, I mean that childcare collectives intentionally and explicitly integrate policies, practices and principles into their organizations that make spaces and structures more conducive to the type of caring they wish to see. Key here is the word intentional. Childcare collectives do not assume that just because they are non-hierarchical organizations that set up childcare in meeting spaces, that childcare will automatically be liberatory and transformative. In fact, they assume that without these policies, principles and practices, childcare providers may become exhausted and frustrated, children could be put in unsafe situations, and parental and community autonomy will be ignored. Furthermore, without policies that directly confront the hegemony of patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism, the discourses and norms which perpetuate these paradigms will continue to be produced and reproduced in everyday activities like childcare. This is why, in trying to combat these large political and economic forces, childcare collectives make relatively small scale interventions and use localized tactics to resist these dominant paradigms and to foster new ways of engaging with each other, and to imagine different

kinds of spaces which nourish collectivized care and mutual aid.

Although childcare collectives' scope of action is relatively small, their political goals are large in that they seek to oppose, resist, and create alternatives to current forms of political and economic domination. These forms of domination, most notably patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism, have deprioritized care and left many parents and careworkers in a secluded and vulnerable position. I turn here to a materialist feminist analysis for understanding why childcare is exploited, devalued and feminized labor. The reproductive labor of childcare cannot be divorced from our economic and political systems and the work of materialist feminists shows that women in the household, as primary caregivers, are an integral part of capitalist accumulation (Frederici 2004; James 2012). In other words, it's not just the men in the factories whose labor is appropriated and commodified, women as caregivers also experience exploitation as they're isolated in their homes expected to reproduce another generation of human capital. This invisible, unpaid (or underpaid), yet absolutely necessary aspect of the economy is still largely ignored by reformists and revolutionaries alike.

Childcare collective's share this analysis of carework as exploited labor. This is clear in an excerpt from Collective C's mission statement:

“As a form of work, childcare has been feminized and devalued in our society. All around us, women are expected to care for children in isolation and without support; schools and jails produce kids like commodities on an assembly line; and domestic workers are exploited while raising the children of the rich.”

Furthermore, in several of my interviews, childcare collective members cited both their feminist and anti-capitalist beliefs as reasons for becoming involved in childcare collective organizing. A childcare collective member in Collective F said, “As a feminist and anti-capitalist, and I don't think this is specific to [my community at all], there's a

devaluation of women's work, which is often carework." Another member, in Collective B, said, "Feminism was my entry point into [childcare collective organizing]. Thinking about both mothers and carework, and how [carework] can be political." The gendering and subsequent exploitation of women's labor, particularly childcare, was continually reiterated in my interviews, and for most people this exploitation was something they also experienced in their own lives. Another member from Collective B spoke candidly about her own experiences with the pressures women face as sole or primary caregivers and how that expectation has devastating repercussions which manifest themselves not just in harmful economic ways which keep women subordinated, but also as psychological trauma. She says, "...it's women who are responsible for carework, and seen as responsible as the default careworkers in families. It's also gendered because my mom, who's a single mom, has a lot of mental health issues that I think are unique to women-- chronic depression, bipolar, suicidal thoughts and things like that." What these quotes help us understand is that not only do childcare collectives and their members share a theoretical analysis of how patriarchy and capitalism are connected, but they also realize that these dynamics manifest themselves in everyday lived realities. Furthermore, these personal experiences are often what led to their initial involvement in childcare collective organizing.

Using this framework, childcare collective organizers acknowledge that although childcare often feels oppressive, exhaustive and isolating, it is not inherently so. It merely feels as though it is because of the way carework has been politically and economically constructed. Part of this construction has to do with how parents are expected to raise children with little to no governmental or community support. Mainstream political logic

has reflected this over the past couple decades by producing social policies that emphasize self-sufficiency and individual autonomy. Within neoliberal capitalism, care has continued to be deprioritized, and subjected to commodification and market privatization. This means that for many parents, affordable and accessible childcare is beyond their reach. This is compounded by the transition from welfare to workfare, in which parents, especially mothers, are compelled into the workforce with the threat of welfare retraction, leaving less time childrearing. Furthermore, voluntary activities like community participation or political activism seem like daunting commitments for parents who are just trying to make ends meet. Thanks to neoliberalism and workfare, “mutual dependence, self-sacrifice, and care for others are undervalued notions” and spaces available for collective action are diminished (McDowell 2004, 146). This affects parent’s ability to become, or stay, involved politically because the neoliberal logic behind the rolling back of welfare discourages the collective labor necessary to provide childcare for political organizing. Despite these challenges many organizations do manage to provide childcare for involved parents, even without the support of a childcare collective. However, adequate childcare that ensures people can participate is still something many parents struggle with, including those in my research.

Childcare collective mission statements reflect this understanding about the intersection between neoliberalism, childcare, and political activism. This understanding also helps them articulate who their work serves. Collective D has a short but concise mission statement that exemplifies this.

“[Collective D] is dedicated to providing high quality child care in order to support parents’ involvement in organizations of resistance and community building. *We provide childcare as an act of solidarity with women, people of color, and poor people, especially poor mothers of color, who are responsible for*

a disproportional amount of childcare, often excluding them from participating in projects of social change and resistance.” (Emphasis mine.)

Collective F also includes something very similar within their larger mission statement. It reads:

“We partner with organizations that recognize childcare as an institutional need. The high cost along with the low quality of childcare has a devastating impact on low-income families who are disproportionately made up of single mothers, immigrant women and families, and women of color.”

Perhaps it seems surprising that this “institutional need” would arise in activist organizations and in communities whose organizing work opposes neoliberalism, capitalism and patriarchy. Why has this need not already been addressed by some organizations or communities? It may indeed be expected that the government and state institutions would not provide social provisions for parents, especially low-income parents, immigrant parents, or parents of color to organize for governmental and systemic change. However, it seems fair to expect social justice organizations and activist communities to provide the collective labor to meet this practical need. Yet in my research, what I discovered, was that many parents in activist communities and social justice organizations do not have their childcare needs met and this puts limitations on their scope of political activism.

One of the reasons childcare is not addressed in activist communities, is that the neoliberal logic of individualism and self-sufficiency is often reproduced in these spaces and not enough is being done to address this dynamic. It’s clear from my interviews with activist parents that the attitude that having children is an individual choice and individual responsibility is often accepted and perpetuated in activist communities. One

mother I interviewed, who is also a member of Collective B, talked about her experiences in anarchist communities before and after having her daughter. She said:

“Before I was a parent my colleagues, and comrades, and friends, everything we did we did together: housing issues, food issues. If you moved to a new city there would always be people in the know telling you here’s how to Xerox the bus pass, here’s a squat. But when I became a parent, they didn’t see it as a group issue, they saw it as an individual issue. And I thought it was really wrong and ironic...I felt everyone switched to conservative values around kids.”

This isn’t just true in the loose affiliation of a political scene however; it’s also true in more formalized activist settings, like collectives and cooperatives. Two parents I interviewed spoke about the difficulties of working at worker cooperatives and raising small children. One, a father who works at a worker owned and run food cooperative, talked about the intense amount of self-advocating and “frankly complaining” he had to do before the coop adopted any policies to support workers with children. Despite being politically radical, this coop still had policies based on the idea of workers as single autonomous individuals, and once a policy was passed, it only included unpaid time off for parental leave.

A mother I spoke with, whose daughter is often looked after by Collective B at community events and conferences, works at a worker-owned and run bookstore and coffeehouse. This cooperative does not partner with Collective B, and the mother often runs into difficulties attending weekly meetings and picking up shifts at the store. Although she described having a great support network of friends who would often look after her daughter with only a moment’s notice, the lack of the cooperative’s formalized policies around parents and childcare, meant that she would miss meetings, or not be able to pick up shifts. Actually, her ability to continue to be a working member relied on her strong, multi-year relationship with the cooperative prior to having a child. The fact that

they made exceptions for her, like the ability to miss more meetings than other workers, was what allowed her to continue to be a member. She said, “I think if I had not been involved with them pre-child I may not have gotten involved. I would not have searched them out.” So although they were able to make exceptions for her because of her pre-existing relationship to the cooperative, the failure to incorporate care into their policy and structure does not address the problem of childcare beyond this particular situation. It's possible, and indeed likely, that the lack of formal recognition of the needs of parents and children has discouraged new members from becoming involved.

Despite these communities and organizations radical politics, they have ignored or disregarded the material needs of parents and children. By doing this, they are essentially telling members that as soon as they have children, they must abandon their activist lifestyles and rely on the very systems they sought to change in the first place; systems engulfed in patriarchy, ruled by the logic of the market, and callous to everyday personal struggles. This does little to encourage the continuation of these projects in the long run, and ensures a higher turnover rate with little to no institutional memory of how or why parents or caregivers left. As Sylvia Federici reminds us, “we cannot build an alternative society and strong a self-reproducing movement unless we redefine our reproduction in a more cooperative way and put an end to the separation between the personal and the political, and between political activism and the reproduction of everyday life” (Federici 2010, 290). This is why real efforts must be made to think about parents and children, and talk openly about how to accommodate and incorporate them, not just into meetings and events, but into the process of shaping and transforming the project. This is not to deny that these efforts are happening in many communities already,

but to call attention to parental and children involvement where it exists, and bring it to political saliency where it doesn't.

Collective policies and principles

In building movements for intergenerational liberation, childcare collectives very much agree with the assessment that “politics is also down there, in the strategic field of small things” (Cruikshank 1999, 124). They seek to find the often hidden openings and the fissures in the dominant political and economic systems and institute policies and principles that rupture these openings and create salient political possibilities. Carework is one of these openings, and is rife with political possibilities, because as a vital aspect of human life, it is merely constructed as oppressive and exploitative, but is not inherently so. By implementing policies that foster collectivized carework, childcare collectives hope that their policies and principles will transcend the childcare collective, extend to the activist community, and eventually radiate out to society at large, undermining the current paradigm of carework as gendered and exploited labor. Furthermore, childcare collectives believe that creating a political foundation for carework as a liberatory practice will transform individualism and self-sufficiency, ideas that pervade nearly all of American society, into mutual dependence and care for others. I turn here to JK Gibson-Graham's work ‘An Ethics of the Local’ to understand how “micropolitical processes make macropolitical settlements possible” (Gibson-Graham 2003, 57).

What exactly do I mean by “micropolitical” processes? I'm talking about specific policies, principles and practices intentionally performed by childcare collectives that encourage collectivized care. These micropolitical processes also act as counter-conducts in that by performing them, members are acting against hegemonic paradigms which

demand individual autonomy and self-sufficiency. Some of these practices are explicitly outlined policies, agreed upon by all members of the collective that are included in collective mission statements or other collective documents. Some are less explicit principles that, while still agreed upon collectively, may be presented as less formal, but are still discussed and performed on a regular basis.

An excellent example of an explicit and clearly stated policy, that childcare collectives vary on only slightly, is the adult to child ratio. All of the childcare collectives in my sample had a policy that an adult should never be left alone with any number of children. Two members from different collectives noted a very practical reason for this: so that an adult can easily use the bathroom during a childcare shift. One collective member went on to also discuss how valuable it is to have the responsibility of care diffuse. She explains, "...that single focus doesn't have to be on you. Even though you still have to always be present and responsible... you can share the presentness and responsibility with others..." Although the specific adult to child ratios vary among collectives, some having 5 to 1, others 3 to 1, the sentiment that being able to rely on others is a vital part of collectivized childcare, was present in nearly all my interviews and is a driving force behind these policies. These ratio policies are part of how childcare collectives take the theory of collectivized care and put it into their everyday practices.

A principle of childcare collective organizing, that I have not seen formalized in collective policies, but was discussed by many of the collective members I interviewed, was the principle of self-care. Collective members encourage each other to take time off if they're feeling overwhelmed, and to be honest about the level of work they're taking on. For a member of Collective E, self-care is as simple as asking for help from another

person. She says, “I step back and I tell someone that I’m not able to do that and ask someone else to step in”. Beyond easing immediate problems, like feelings of exhaustion or being overwhelmed, self-care also has long-term personal and collective benefits. Two members of Collective B talked about this at length. One member described that taking care of yourself “is an ongoing exploration of figuring out what are your needs”. She also said that the collective taught her a lot about herself. She says, “Learning boundaries was a big thing. I learned boundaries with [Collective B], we all did”. Another member from Collective B explains what self-care means to the collective and to her personally:

“In [Collective B] we have self-care as a principle. We constantly have to remind ourselves of that and we have to encourage and look out for each other, and that’s usually something that gets dropped especially for women who do carework. [I take care of myself] by being aware of my limitations and needs, and this has personally been a struggle and I think it’s a gendered struggle... I let the group know what I’m feeling and also try to be perceptive about what other people are feeling.”

Self-care is important for collective organizing because people who are cared for by themselves and others are more likely to continue this work and less likely to suffer from activist burnout. These policies and principles encourage an attention to the needs of others and the needs of ourselves, and cultivate a reflexivity about our own abilities and limitations. In a society where we’re encouraged to work, work, work, this is a challenge to the neoliberal capitalist emphasis on efficiency and productivity. The principle of self-care, as practiced here, suggests “the surfacing of an oppositional consciousness [and] constitutes a reflexive agenda, a proactive matter of transforming oneself and producing a new subjectivity” (Ettlinger 550). In other words, the performance of self-care affords people the opportunity to rethink ways of acting politically and, more broadly, ways of engaging politically. It encourages people to regard relationships with other as co-

constitutive, where rather than viewing individuals as discreet entities, they see their well-being as bound up in the well-being of others. This is important in political organizing because it reminds organizers and activists that they should not treat themselves and others like worker bees who must fight the good fight until they have nothing left to give. In putting these small policies and practices into place, childcare collectives are trying to institutionalize and reproduce the idea that we have a responsibility to care for ourselves and each other, and that when taken seriously, these policies and practices create stronger, healthier, and more sustainable political projects.

Adult-to-child ratios and self-care are among the many topics discussed in childcare collective volunteer trainings. Trainings are done for new childcare volunteers, and although not all childcare collectives have them, more than half of the collectives in my sample offered them on a regular basis to new volunteers. These include Collectives A, B, C and D. For Collective D, a member explained that the main goal of their training is to acquaint volunteers with their model of organizing, which they consider to be allyship. He said, “We explain that an ally is someone who supports; someone who’s non-judgmental... We’re here to support, not here to lead.” A member from Collective B talked about teaching volunteers to be “actively non-judgmental”, which the collective considers to be extremely valuable when working with parents from various cultural and religious backgrounds. The assumption is that parents know what’s best, and the collective should be supportive of the family’s right to self-determination when it comes to raising, educating, and disciplining their child. When working with groups comprised of low-income parents, the collective is attempting to confront issues that may arise from volunteers coming in with the attitude that they are benevolent saviors there to care for

needy or underprivileged children. Without the training, volunteers, many who are young, white, and not parents themselves, may take on this paternalistic role.

Another member of Collective D I spoke with clarified that their training is two hours long, and besides learning the basic principles of the childcare collective, they also hope to help volunteers deal with difficult issues of oppression in a child-friendly way. He said, "...we go through some scenarios and how to handle them, or you don't have to handle them. If you don't feel like talking about your gender identity or race, you don't have to. If you want to, we offer an appropriate way to do it..." This is important, because although childcare collectives work to make sure they do not reproduce racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in children, they don't want their volunteers to be put in the position to teach children complicated and often painful lessons about oppression. This holds true especially if that kind of oppression has been experienced personally and traumatically by the volunteer. For instance, if they've been a victim of homophobic or racist violence and prefer to not be reminded of that trauma, they are given tools with how to address race and sexuality if they come up, or how to change the conversation if they do not want to engage. By upholding this principle, volunteers are able to engage with children on a level they're comfortable with, rather than being expected to always interact in a prescribed way. Some days the volunteer may be up for discussing gender identity with a child, but other days they may just want to play a game. In this way, these policies and principles are provisional, allowing them to be performed in certain ways and at certain times in a way that feels right to collective members and volunteers. Policies and principles such as this one can be both intentional and provisional at the same time. Intentional because they combat particular regimes of

power, but provisional because they recognize there is no one size fits all model for every individual, every community, or every child. Childcare collectives are not are not trying to establish a set of rules for all time, but instead, they are setting up fluid and flexible frameworks that encourage people to care in meaningful and transformative ways that are appropriate to their particular situation.

Practices of caring

The previous section dealt with policies and principles that were discussed in my interviews with childcare collective members. Now I'd like to consider an actual practice of institutionalized caring that I participant-observed at the Intergalactic Conspiracy of Childcare Collectives' (ICCC) Network Gathering (NG). If you refer back to Figure 3.3, you'll see that the second activity of the Network Gathering is called "Creating a Safe Space to Share". It immediately followed introductions and a "getting-to-know-you" game.

One of the facilitators of the NG introduced this activity to the group by explaining the intent and purpose of creating a safe space:

"Something that's important is creating an environment...where we all feel comfortable in sharing our truths and building our agenda. We're hoping to really come up with some next steps, and share where we're at and co-create together in our work and in our world... So I wanna protect this time, and this is our time, and everything we have to say in this space is valid, and everything we bring to this space is valuable. So what I want to do is find a way we can share some about what we need to make a space where we feel comfortable."

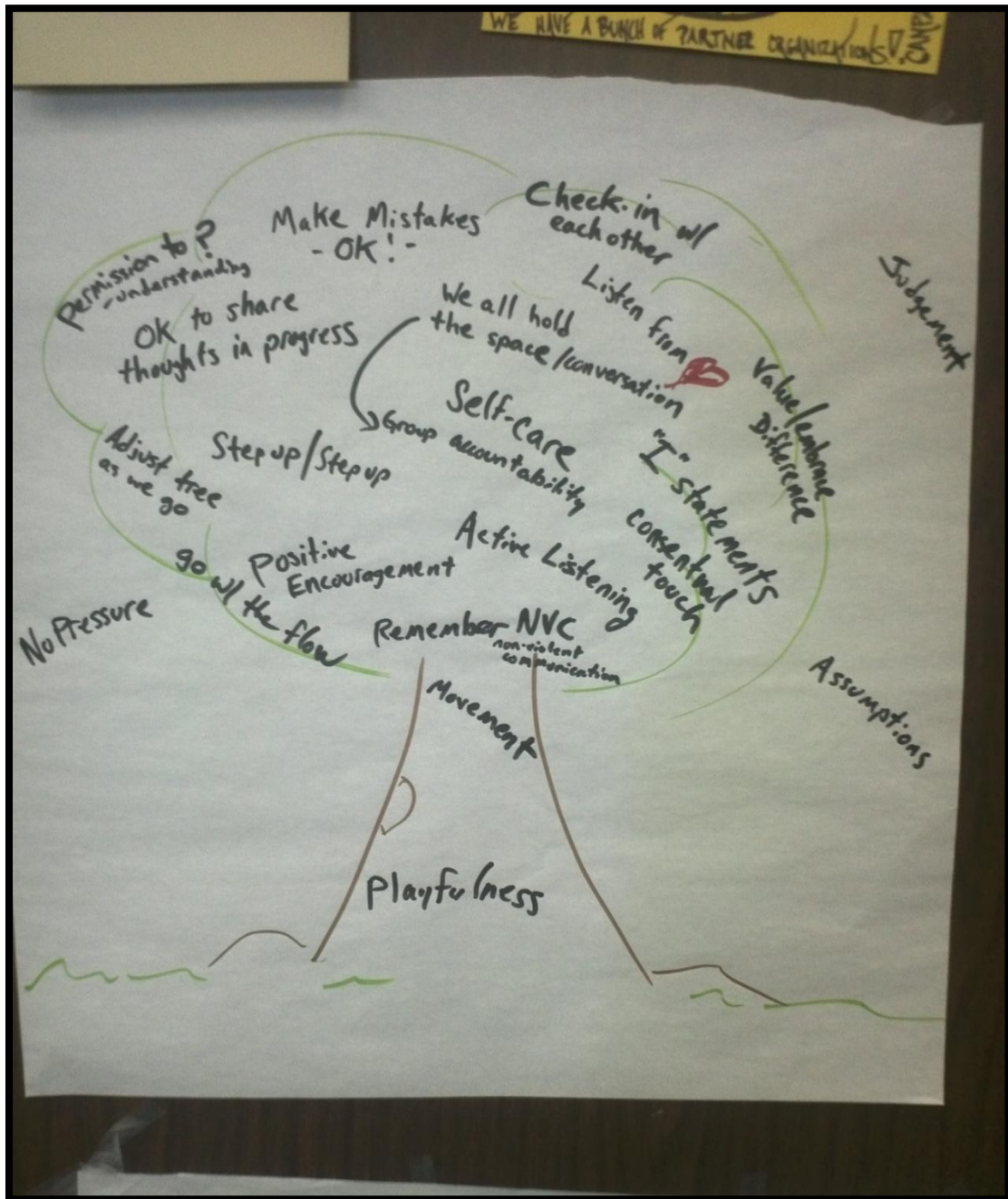
After this introduction, another facilitator pulled out a large piece of white paper with a tree drawn on it. He explained the history and process of the activity:

"We did this last year with the kids we were working with. We did a go around letting everyone know what we needed to make a space feel comfortable to act and participate in. So we put the positive things in and on the tree... Then we came up with a list of negative things that we wanted to keep out of our space,

and they went outside the tree. And when we were planning this, it was brought up that things are fluid and can move in and out of the tree. It's like a living document..."

Image 5.1 shows the final product of the activity with various words and phrases inside and outside of the tree. After the facilitators explained the activity, we went around in a

Images 5.1: Tree Activity - creating a safe space to share



circle with every participant saying what made them comfortable or uncomfortable in a discussion space, and what they needed to be fully engaged.

A couple of major themes came up as people were saying what they wanted and needed in the space. One of the first themes to arise was that of non-judgment. This took the form of people wanting the ability to make mistakes and also to share thoughts that weren't fully formed. On the tree this reads as "OK to share thoughts in progress." Again, this returns to the notion that childcare collective organizers are comfortable with the idea that thinking is provisional, and there does not always need to be a correct answer or a perfect course of action.

Strongly related to non-judgment was the desire to limit the amount of assumptions people might have about other participants' beliefs and actions. One person mentioned that "some people might come late or leave early and [we should] not assume we know why". Another person, who was worried about people suspecting they weren't paying attention because they were doodling, said, "...not assuming that people aren't paying attention because they might be staying engaged in their own way". Also, the use of "I" statements" was important to several participants who asked for it to be added to the tree. One of them said, "It's important to talk from your own experiences versus generalizing, and [people] not creating something in their head and putting it out there that isn't something they've experienced". All of these also related to "value/embrace difference" because these participants were concerned with making sure that different ways of acting and being in the space, as well as the differing experiences everyone was bringing, were given equal weight and not dismissed simply because they are not normative.

Another important theme for participants was “group accountability” which is also represented in “positive encouragement”, “active listening”, and “step-up/step-up”. At first, someone suggested “step-up/step-back”. This is a common activist saying designed to encourage people who are being shy during a meeting to step-up and participate, and people who are talking a lot to be self-aware enough to step-back and allow other people the opportunity to participate. However, another participant said she liked “step-up/step-up” better. She explained the difference between the phrases: “Something that someone taught me, which I like, is a modification of step-up/step-back, which is step-up/step-up. Either you’re stepping up to participate more if you’re someone who hasn’t participated, or you’re stepping up to listen more.” As a group we decided that this was the phrase we wanted on the tree because it puts a positive spin on the old phrase and asks everyone, no matter what their participation level has been up to that point, to remain actively engaged. It also supports another addition to the tree, which was “we all hold the space/conversation”. This implicates everyone, not just the facilitators or organizers, in the process of maintaining the safe space and shaping the conversation.

Other additions to the tree which speak to people’s desire for a creative, fun, and dynamic meeting space were “playfulness” and “movement”. Movement because participants felt like physical activity would help them stay engaged and alert, and playfulness because of the positive energy it brings. One person said, “I really enjoy the idea of playfulness. I think it’s really important because we’re having a lot of emotional and political conversations and it’s good to have as an undertone.” These additions to the tree show that childcare collective organizers are concerned with bringing playfulness and creativity into political spaces and political discussions even when there aren’t

children present. They integrate playfulness as a practice because they believe, and this is reflected in Collective C's mission statement, political movement building is a process that is "playful, imaginative, and creative, not just serious and rational". The practice of playfulness was exemplified throughout the Network Gathering in the way art was integrated into many of the activities (Image 5.1 being one example) and how games and activities were played before and after each break. Further discussion of the political affectivity of play will continue in the following chapter.

The point of discussing the tree activity is not just to show what types of behavior are important to childcare collective organizers, nor to simply understand how they actively create the kind of space they would like to see, but also to show how the practice of asking every participant to communicate what makes them feel comfortable is an act of institutionalized caring. It's an institutionalized act of caring because once someone makes a request for something to be added to the tree, it requires that every participant respond and acknowledge that person's request and that they enter into "an ethical relation of responsibility for the other person" (Young 2000, 58). It creates a communal bond for which now every participant is responsible for maintaining. I liken this to Iris Marion Young's idea of "inclusive political communication", particularly her emphasis on the greeting. She writes:

"Greeting, which I shall also call public acknowledgement, names communicative political gestures through which those who have conflicts aim to solve problems, recognize others as included in the discussion, especially those with whom they differ in opinion, interest, or social location." (61)

The assumption guiding this practice of greeting is that traditional political settings, like a city council meeting, would ignore any public acknowledgement of feeling, emotion or discomfort thereby excluding people with different needs, abilities, and ways of engaging

with the world. By merely creating the space to talk about what people need and want in order to fully participate in a political meeting or discussion, it immediately makes that space more open, inclusive, and caring of all people. Furthermore, the greeting as embodied in the tree activity, reveals that everyone must work together to make the space comfortable and the discussion meaningful, and if we are not intentionally working at this, people's emotional and physical needs will be silenced and marginalized in the name of rationality and efficiency.

Conclusion

These policies, principles, and practices performed by childcare collectives are intentionally integrated into their institutions because they seek to undo the exploitative and exclusionary forces of patriarchy, capitalism, and neoliberalism. Rather than conceiving of these forces as overwhelming, all-encompassing, and in need of a full-scale revolution to topple, childcare collectives see them as having tears, holes, and fissures that can be opened up, nourished, and turned into daily revolutionary activities. However, if these possibilities are not intentionally discovered, fostered, and put into practice, even the most radical revolutionary can overlook them, or worse, reproduce hegemonic paradigms without even realizing it. In this way, it's helpful to think of these policies, principles, and practices as "counter-conducts", or ways of acting in opposition to normative power relations that uphold sexism, classism, racism, homophobia and transphobia. Counter-conducts "represent counters to regulatory techniques of power, which connect mentalities (e.g., modernization) with practices (e.g., gentrification)" (Ettlinger 550). Childcare collectives hope that their counter-conducts transform people's mentalities of confrontation, opposition and aggression, into mentalities of care,

openness, and reflexivity. This is not to say that people should abandon confrontation when it comes to politics, but that care is also a valuable mentality to cultivate, and that confrontation without care will only replace one oppressive system with another.

These counter-conducts also open up the possibility that power is diffuse, rather than top-down, and that everyone has the power to pro-actively resist oppression. This resistance will not just come from a correct analysis of systems of oppression and techniques of power however. It must also come from an intentional, reflexive, and pro-active transformation of oneself that can only happen when practicing and performing counter-conducts that emphasize intersubjectivity and care for others. These are ideas and practices that patriarchy, capitalism and neoliberalism violently oppose and repress on many different scales. By institutionalizing care, childcare collectives are not merely challenging the economic systems and state structures that allow repression to continue, but creating spaces where resistance to them is a daily experience that will lead to new social formations built from the ground up on an ethic of care.

CHAPTER 6

PLAYFUL POLITICS:

THE POLITICAL AFFECTIVITY OF CHILDREN AND CHILDCARE

In the previous two chapters I have tried to show that the organizational structure and the institutional policies of childcare collectives are rife with political possibilities that at first may seem insignificant, but when looked at more closely, offer counter hegemonic practices by infusing care for others and reflexivity into political processes and actions. Now, I want to explore what kind of political affectivity comes from the actual childcare the collectives perform. What was clear from my interviews was that collective members see micropolitical possibilities arising from something as simple as the mere presence of children and childcare in spaces normally reserved for purely political and organizing activities. Collective members and those they partner with see and experience how, by creating child-friendly and caring spaces, the collectives are actively transforming the atmosphere and affect of a meeting room, a conference center, or a direct action. This transformation often brings to light political possibilities that were not previously visible and offers people the opportunity to rethink political strategies, tactics, and ways of engaging with others. Furthermore, the presence and involvement of children can enliven a political message, and allow young people to exercise political agency, which they are afforded few opportunities to do in traditional political settings and processes (Cohen 2005; Kallio 2008). Ultimately, childcare collectives hope that by bringing children and childcare into political spaces, acts of caring will no longer be

relegated to a separate sphere, making children and the social reproduction involved in their care invisible. They seek to merge political activism, the social reproduction of carework, and community caring to create intergenerational, inclusive, and sustainable social movements.

Children's Space, Play, and Politics

Special attention should be paid to the political aspects of children's space and to the potentiality of children's space to be politically transformative. In part, attention is needed because of how much neoliberal capitalism and economic restructuring has diminished open, safe and creative space for children to play. Cindi Katz writes at great length about how poor and working class children see their value decline "in poorly maintained neighborhood parks and playgrounds, and in the unsafe and decaying public spaces of the residential city" (Katz 2004, 159). As parents fear for their children's safety, children become isolated in their homes and are afforded less opportunities for gross motor growth which is important for developmental learning (178). They are also away from the public eye, invisible to most adults, and often invisible to political organizations and policy makers. Lack of available public space for children is also accompanied by the commercialization of leisure space for children. So while access to free, community playgrounds is being diminished, we also see the rise of private, commercial playgrounds like those at McDonald's, or places like Discovery Zone where adults pay to let their children play (McKendrick, et al 2000). Given this dynamic, creating free, open, and safe places for children to play is a political act in and of itself, but becomes particularly politically salient when these spaces are visible, interactive, and foster a kind of play that nourishes and invigorates politics.

Logistically speaking, childcare collectives perform childcare in many different kinds of settings, with several different intentions in mind. Some childcare collectives, who do childcare mainly for weekly meetings, will set up a childcare space in the same room as the meeting. Collective B, which primarily does childcare for one-time events like conferences, usually requests their partner organization for that event to provide a separate childcare space. This partly has to do with wanting the children to have a space they can call their own and partly because providing childcare for a week-end conference requires more supplies, and thusly more storage space for snacks, activities, and games. However, a member of Collective B also spoke about not wanting that separate space to be too far removed from the rest of the conference activities. Although they want their own space, they don't want it to be isolated or invisible because they're hoping to incorporate children into the conference. She said that, "It's an important experience for parents and people who are not primary caregivers to be around kids, and for kids to be around other radical adults. Conferences are good for that and can be a really fun and empowering experience, with a lot of visibility". Often collectives do less formal childcare for events, and instead create child-friendly spaces with games and activities that children and adults can enjoy together, allowing for fun, low-key intergenerational interaction, and taking some of the pressure of the parents. Collective F did something like this for a field day sponsored by a local organization, in which they "didn't really do care, just hung out with the kids and played". A member from this collective said they do events like this because they "want to push the issue of children in public political spaces more".

In my interviews many collective members talked about what having children in public political spaces means for those spaces and the adults in them. They also talked about the kind of playful and spontaneous atmosphere that is encouraged when, as a member of Collective C put it, young people are there “to draw out that energy to make a positive space”. In the case of direct actions, a member from Collective D talked about the very practical and useful effect children and child-friendly spaces have on a protest. He said Collective D created what’s called a Baby Bloc for an anti-globalization protest to ensure the safety of children, parents, and families at a large scale demonstration. This Baby Bloc was designed to allow parents and children to participate in the protest, but also to discourage destructive protesters and violent police officers from engaging in those behaviors around young people who are potentially more physically vulnerable. The collective member also explained that when protests are family-friendly “it’s harder [for the news media] to spin it as something for people from the fringes who are violent and dangerous”. In this case, the space of the Baby Bloc sought to include people who don’t want to be associated with, or affected by, protest vandalism, and who are afraid of becoming the victims of violent police retaliation. Many parents cannot afford, monetarily or temporally, to get hurt or arrested during a protest so this lets them join an intentionally created safe space. Moreover, it shows onlookers, reporters, police, and even other protesters, that issues associated with globalization are important to families, parents, and caregivers, and not just young, child-less people with the leisure time to join a protest who also have nothing to lose.

With the Baby Bloc, a space was carved out for children and families, but this doesn’t always have to be the case. When the distinction between children’s space and

adult space is blurred, political settings are also transformed by the presence of young people. An example of this was described to me by a member of Collective C who was also active in their city's Occupy movement. He was organizing with the Occupy people of color caucus, which was meeting regularly during the peak of the occupations. The POC caucus was exclusively for non-white Occupy organizers to talk about issues of particular importance to them, and to discuss how to address racism within the movement. He explained that when people first came to the POC caucus, there was a lot of tension and a lot of internal friction between people who wanted to move directly to action and people who wanted more time to organize and process. One of the first things they were able to agree on was implementing childcare, which was done with the help of members from Collective C. He said that once there were children in the meeting space, the change in people's attitudes was palpable. He said:

“Once we actually had kids in the space, the friction and the anger that people would bring to the meeting was really different, really diffused. People were positive, and it's a hard place to be positive because there are a lot of energies and a lot of things people are coming and getting upset about...and it was cute because kids started saying stuff as well, and what needed to happen in the meeting space was a re-imaging of the meeting space, the fact that kids were there was changing the whole dynamic of what we're really doing this work for, and I think that was really positive”

Of course it's possible that people were being careful and respectful around the children, not wanting to argue or be antagonistic in front of them. However, in this context, it seems that the presence of children reminded participants that there are other ways of engaging politically without hostility and aggression, especially among people who are working towards the same political goals. This is an example of how “an affective ethics of encounter” can orient affect towards political possibilities and potentials (Popke 2009, 83). For the meaning of affect I turn to Nigel Thrift and others who describe affect as the

physical, emotional, and visceral responses that are derived from our relations and engagements with others that can be felt individually or collectively (Thrift 2004; Conradson 2005). In this case, the affect created by the presence of children acted as a tool for political transformation when it opened up the possibility for people to behave differently with one another. During the POC caucus meetings, participants thought hostility was part and parcel to the political experience and confrontation was equated with anger and tension. Perhaps some felt that there was no foreseeable way it could be any different. However, with the change in atmosphere and affect brought by the presence and participation of the children, “what was formerly invisible or imperceptible becomes constituted as visible and perceptible through a new structure of attention” (Thrift 2004, 67). The ability to reimagine the meeting space was revealed to the participants and drew out a more positive and productive energy from the group.

Another collective member I interviewed from Collective B, which focuses on organizing at political conferences, said that she felt like “the childcare space is the most positive space at conferences”. She said this in response to being asked to give an example of a childcare interaction that was positive and made her feel good. She followed that statement by describing a playful and spontaneous moment at a conference for workplace democracy. She explained:

“We had an impromptu theater performance. I had a box of costumes, and whenever we do activities we try to incorporate radical principles, like anti-authoritarian principles and feminist principles, and things like that. But anyway, we had this theater thing, and it was a 13-year-old and a 14-year-old, all the way down to a 5-year-old, and there were six kids doing it. They were indigenous, and I don’t even remember what they were performing but I was really touched by how it came about really spontaneously, and we had the resources for it and we had the theater zone...and it was really awesome.”

By having the resources and by intentionally creating that space, playfulness was allowed to flourish. It indeed happened spontaneously, but it happened only because the right conditions for the performance to occur had been put in place by the collective.

Furthermore, this playful space that fostered spontaneity was created intentionally within the context of a normally political space like a conference. By having these spaces co-exist, not only does it open up more public space for children's play, but it allows the play to enliven the political space. As children's play creates joyful encounters, it also reminds people that they do not have to treat politics as dull, dry, and based in discursive practices. It can be based in the creativity of movement, artistic expression, and playfulness as well. This same collective member said that when she normally thinks of a conference room she thinks of someplace that is "not colorful, not stimulating...[it's] draining, uncomfortable, or minimally comfortable, and designed for one purpose, which is to sit". By inviting play into these places childcare collectives are bringing "the sort of playful imagination, openness to possibilities, and freshness of energy" (Katz 2004, 257) to political conversations which often focus on the negative, harmful, and debilitating effects of capitalism, rather than on the revolutionary imagination.

By bringing childcare, children, and play into political spaces like a protest, meeting, or conference, childcare collectives hope to foster convivial engagements that appeal to people's imagination, creativity, and affinity for others. While indeed political struggles often require angry confrontations, serious reflection, and long conversations, that does not preclude the necessity of imagining different ways of engaging politically, ways that often become most apparent with the presence of children and children's play. Play should not be reserved for children, but should be expanded beyond the childcare

Image 6.1: Giant Puzzle of a Mural - used in a children's scavenger hunt during the Allied Media Conference



space at an event in a way that confronts traditional political practices of mere deliberation and asks participants to try something creative. As Cindi Katz reminds us, “play also transforms the people playing and opens the possibility for more willful social transformations” (107). These social transformations include the way we identify ourselves, the way we relate to others, and how we define collective political action.

Children as Political Actors

Children’s geographers have shown that bringing children into public political spaces and the political fold in general, helps us rethink children’s agency and therefore rethink the realm of the political as well. Activism is generally considered the “rational activities of adults that are designed to challenge established political discourses and hierarchies” (Boscoe 2010, 387), and it is assumed that children are not capable of these rational decision making processes (Cohen 2005). However, Elwood and Mitchell have shown that children have critical perceptions about inequality, subjectivity, and power relations and are capable of articulating these perceptions and experiences (Elwood & Mitchell 2012).

During my interviews I saw how childcare collectives took this theoretical potential of children’s political awareness and turned it into action. This was most clear in an interview I did with an organizer who worked for a community group that focuses on economic justice and the improvement of public schools. She spoke about a town hall event being held in response to new public school policies. There were over 300 community members in attendance and Collective A provided childcare for the parents attending the meeting. They had around 20 children and with the help of childcare volunteers, the children made a huge sign with words and pictures about what they

wanted their schools to look like and the kind of policies that mattered to them. The organizer I interviewed explained that at the end of the town hall, the children came out and described their sign, and especially with the media and news cameras present, they stole the show. She said, “It was a really amazing way to honor the voices of young folks, but also...have the space to have the conversation themselves which was only possible with the support of the [childcare] collective”.

Giving children the space to express their opinions means acknowledging “children as political even in circumstances in which they are not free to confront, act, or intervene” (Elwood & Mitchell 2012, 4). By understanding that children, like adults, have political feelings but are often not afforded the opportunity to express them, means changing what could be viewed as political action. It may even mean that when children aren’t being overtly political, like when they are playing, they are often expressing or acting out their political sentiments. In other words, children’s political expressions can be creative and playful, like in the case of the sign at the town hall meeting, and children’s play and creativity can also be political expressions. These political expressions enable “a consideration of the affective, the performative, the theatrical and the playful dynamics of collective action” (Boscoe 2010, 387), things that several collective members I interviewed believe are sorely missing from collective action, particularly in leftist politics. A member from Collective C said that he appreciates the energy of young people. He explained that “organizers have a very sullen tone because, you know, we’re constantly fighting in the movement or hearing really depressing stories”. For him, political organizing outside of the childcare collective sometimes “felt really stagnant because [we] weren’t employing the skills and creativity of young

people”. A member from Collective E said that she gets really drained at social justice conferences because mostly participants “just sit in a room and listen to someone talk”. Similar to having children in a space, having children’s voices heard also brings dynamism to political messages and political actions. The children at the town hall meeting stole the show because, as many people have expressed throughout my research, involving children in political processes brings a new vitality to them. Political messages which are often dry, boring, and full of rhetoric, can become playful, spontaneous, and appeal to people on a more personal and visceral level.

Changing Perceptions on Children and Carework

As I mentioned previously, many communities and even organizations I interviewed for this research, were providing childcare prior to working with a childcare collective. Many community groups fighting for racial and economic justice, and neighborhood organizations fighting for better schools and improved social services, have members that bring their children to meetings and events. Even without formalized childcare, children are welcome and accepted in these spaces because these struggles are not divorced from families’ private lives in the way more revolutionary inclined groups might be fighting for more abstract causes. However, even many revolutionary groups, like the radical Puerto Rican group The Young Lords, made childcare a priority in the 1970’s well before the establishment of the childcare collectives I’m writing about. They occupied buildings and set up day cares (Nelson 2001). This was to provide a practical service, but they also set up day care centers because they viewed access to childcare as part of the revolutionary struggle. The idea that children, childcare, and carework in general are necessary to social movements is what childcare collectives are trying to

push, and many of them see it has something that's been forgotten by leftist politics. This is clear from more recent social movements, like the Occupy Wall Street movement, which mostly ignored issues of children, access to childcare, and the labor of careworkers, as well as the importance of engaging a future generation to join the struggle.

So while childcare collectives are not on the vanguard of bringing children into political spaces, they are intentionally organizing in a way that integrates children into politically settings and forces people to think about children and the role of care work, and to even confront their own feelings about children and care. This is more necessary in some communities than in others. During my research I regularly found that the younger and more radical the political community, the less hospitable it was to children. This was what one mother whose daughter is looked after by Collective B told me about the largely anarchist community she organizes in. However, she also said that once her daughter was around adults in communal and political spaces, their attitudes towards children really changed. She said,

“I would say that our community is not very child oriented...I feel like before I had [my daughter], a lot of people were really anti-having kids. Since then there's been a huge attitude shift...and I think a lot of people have seen that you can bring a child and you can incorporate them.”

For this mother, she felt that the ability to have her children present in public political settings made things easier for her, and also helped the community she organized with become more comfortable with children, and more willing to open spaces up to intergenerational activity.

A member from that same collective, Collective B, said that since working with the collective, she also noticed a change in the community they organized with. She said,

although it wasn't completely transformative, since the collective had started providing childcare at political conferences and events, there was now at least the recognition of the needs of parents and children. Before, she said, that recognition was not even there, and now organizers are putting "parents and children welcome" on their fliers. Although this may seem superficial, for her it was an important indication that people who were "so entrenched in their attitudes" of ambivalence or hostility towards children and parents were in fact changing. She said that as long as the collective and community continue "relating over time, it's not necessary for them to change before your eyes".

For childcare collectives, thinking about children is more than thinking about intergenerationality and parental inclusion. It's also thinking about basic human needs. This same member from Collective B said that children's needs make us consider our own human needs, and the needs of each other.

"Often children's needs are all of our needs but they're just not apparent. They fade quicker without food. They need rest, they need play, they need care, they need safety, all these things. They're more vulnerable. Actually all of us need these things but we don't go to conferences thinking about these things...So children bring a lot of these human needs to the forefront."

By drawing attention to these vital needs, childcare in public political spaces brings the carework involved in social reproduction to the forefront of political struggles. Social reproduction, particularly care for younger generations, has long been in the shadow of the bigger problems of capitalist production, seen as a secondary aspect of oppression and exploitation, and not necessarily a place to begin building an alternative. However, as the collective member described above, these are the things that are most important to people's lives and the most devastating when they are taken away or privatized. Furthermore, basing political resistance on social reproduction can happen anywhere, it

does not need a specific political site. It can happen in the home, in the public park, in the town hall, or it could happen wherever a childcare collective decides to set up shop. Social reproduction's "piecemenal and sprawling geography offers no particular site at which to organize...yet it is precisely [its] ubiquity that makes it so important" (Katz 2001, 718). Although social reproduction is everywhere, we often forget about it, even in our own lives. We do not think of babysitting, or caring for an elderly parent, as political, but it is precisely in drawing these acts into the political fold that "social reproduction reconnects culture, environment, and political economy in opposition to capitalist globalizations across a wide and differentiated terrain" (718). The vital stuff of life, food, care, play, is what connects all of us, and it is what has the potential to revitalize a political tradition that often gets caught up in its own rhetoric, infighting, and focuses on large abstract, intangible problems. Carework is not intangible. It can happen right here, right now. It may take a little work to make it equitable, integral, collective, and therefore revolutionary, but only by harnessing the revolutionary potential of everyday activities is there a chance of political revolutions taking hold in a long term and meaningful way.

Conclusion

When I asked childcare collective members what their long term organizational goals were, their answers were not what a traditional political organizer might expect. They did not say create more childcare collectives, or increase the size of their collective. Although increasing capacity and outreach to new volunteers and partner organizations are concerns of the collectives, when thinking about the long haul, they are more

concerned with how their work gets integrated into existing political struggles or movements.

A member from Collective A said that “the great end result, if we were a really successful organization, would be for all organizations to have their own childcare”. A member from Collective B echoed this statement when she explained that “it is a goal of [our collective] to not always be doing childcare for the same organizations”. For their collective, although they wanted to partner with more organizations and a diversity of them, they did not want to enter into an indefinite relationship with them, but rather transform organizations and communities through collectivized childcare. She also went on to say that their collective is “an experiment and we haven’t totally finished evolving”, which also speaks to their openness and willingness to be content with different outcomes, and to embracing dynamic relationships with partner organizations. Also from Collective B, another member described a long-term goal of their collective as integrating the children’s space and the political meeting space so that the two wouldn’t be different. She said, “The conference room would be a childcare space too. That would be the ideal thing...when I think of a childcare space, it’s what I like all spaces to be; living space, meeting space, they would be more conducive to self-care and you would be stimulated and inspired and encouraged.” By merging the spaces, and merging the goals of the childcare collective and the partner organization, childcare collectives are trying to eliminate a dichotomy between spaces of care/carework and spaces of politics/political movements. Their hope is that if they are one and the same, these political struggles will be more inclusive, lively, and intergenerationally sustainable.

To further push this point, a member of Collective D said an eventual goal was to phase the actual service of childcare out of their collective. He explained,

“I think a lot of social justice organizations have making themselves obsolete as a goal...our goal is to do more of a consulting type role where we tell an organization how to set up childcare...We want to grow our capacity, but our goal is not to be the provider of childcare to every social justice campaign in the city. That’s just not what we’re trying to do.”

He also went on to say that one policy they started in the last year was asking partner organizations to provide some childcare volunteers. This creates more of a symbiotic relationship between the collective and the partner organization. This way the collective is supporting the partner organization, but they are also being supported by the partner organization. By recognizing this mutual dependence they are doing more than just providing a service, or acting as a charity. They are building networks of care in which the labor of childcare becomes the collective responsibility of everyone involved in the political project. Working towards this collective solidarity through the labor of social reproduction, and particularly childcare, helps people realize what is at stake in their political struggle. What is at stake is care for ourselves and each other, the most vital stuff of life.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This thesis was a labor of love, not just because of my personal involvement in childcare collectives, but because of a deep desire to theorize and practice political alternatives to the current economic and political system. I know that many political activists feel an aura of defeatism on the left. There is the feeling that the revolution will never come and we will keep reforming and changing only to have capitalism beat us to the punch, and to have neoliberalism capture and commodify our alternatives. It seems as though we are always one step behind the forces we are trying to fight because our responses are never fully formed, complete, or all-encompassing enough. The food cooperative either can't afford to stay open, or it becomes franchised and workers lose their standing. The Occupy movement fizzles out at the same time that "99%" t-shirts can be bought in stores. These kinds of events are no longer surprising, they are expected, and there seems to be very little we can do to stop them.

When I started my research, I was not necessarily thinking about ways to theorize alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. I was thinking about how childcare collectives are engaging with political organizations, and how they may transform them through the practice of childcare. I was also thinking about what they may be bringing into a political space at any given moment. I had seen these dynamics at work as a member of a childcare collective myself, and certainly I expected that members of other childcare collectives, and the people they work with, would convey similar experiences. However,

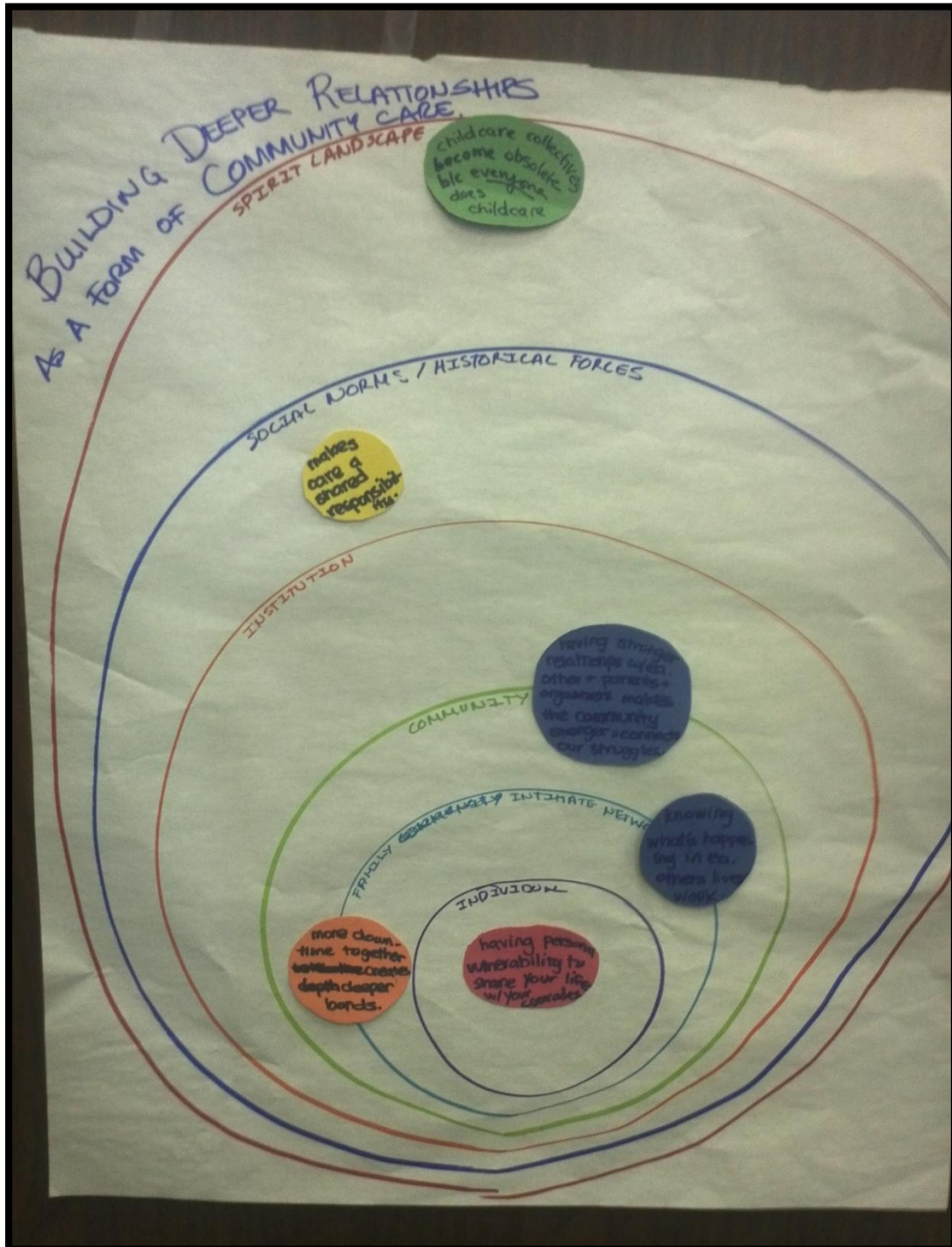
I did not expect them to discuss the impact of childcare collectives on such a large scale. During the Network Gathering, people talked at great length about movement building. They discussed how the caring practices of childcare collectives could radiate outward, beyond their immediate circumstances and communities. This was most clear during the Growth Edges activity when people talked about aspects of their collective they wanted to work on and grow through. We used these growth edges to create galaxies (since it's the *Intergalactic* Conspiracy of Childcare Collectives) that would show what might happen if we accomplished our goals. A Network gathering organizer explains how we should envision this activity:

“What would be the impact on us as individuals, what would be the impact on our families and intimate network, what would be the impact on our community, what would be the impact on institutions in our cities, what would be the impact on social norms and historical forces, and what would be the impact on spirit or landscape? ... we envision this activity ... as a way to talk about our shared politics and shared values. Like, what's our vision for the world and if we were to achieve that, what would it look like and, what would it mean for the movements we're trying to create?”

In Image 7.1, you can see the visual representation of this activity. Each circle, or planet, is an effect of accomplishing a goal, and the rings are the aspects of our world or society that accomplishing that goal would have an impact on. This is a beautiful example of how childcare collectives start with an idea or goal, like “community care”, and envision that radiating outward to not just transform interpersonal relationships, but even the institutional and historical forces that continue to shape our daily lives. Rather than care being an aspect of organizing, it is actually the foundation through which all transformation can occur. In this formulation, care is not combating the oppression and exploitation of neoliberal capitalism, it is displacing and overcoming it. We are no longer responding to hegemonic forces, but creating new systems, and new ways of thinking,

from which to build alternatives based on care. Furthermore, to begin to formulate alternatives through care, we do not need to start only at the very top, making broad, sweeping, immediate revolutions. Precisely because care is such an intimate and

Image 7.1: Growth Edges Galaxy - the irradiating effects of care



everyday experience, we may necessarily begin with the small, micropolitical changes that will extend to other aspects of society. We cannot merely wish that this expansion will happen though. We must intentionally be working together to ensure that we reproduce the social interactions and political processes that we want to see, not just hoping that they come about because we believe in the centrality of care.

I could, however, imagine someone dismissing what I have just argued. Another person could approach a study of childcare collectives and see a bunch of tiny collectives who have no real demands, make no lasting political or policy changes, and gather once a year to hang out and make colorful artistic renditions of their beliefs and goals. At best they are making the lives of a few activist parents easier, at worst they are diverting attention from the “real” political struggles that involve organized resistance on a global or massive scale. I think this would be a wildly unfair critique, but I do think it would be worthwhile to have someone look at childcare collectives with a slightly more critical eye than I was able to. The many years I’ve invested in childcare collectives have rendered it nearly impossible for me to ask the kinds of questions an outsider might.

Something I have reflected on, and would benefit from a more critical engagement with childcare collectives, is their role in aiding the reconfiguration of welfare and government support. A worthy, but perhaps difficult question to answer would be: how might childcare collectives be picking up the slack left by the retraction of social services and welfare, rather than challenging it? By offering voluntary, free and community based childcare, childcare collectives are providing a service that should be guaranteed by formal institutions which have the capacity to care for everyone. According to Barbara Cruikshank, conservatives and liberals alike “argue that

neighborhood, family, church, and voluntary associations can be refashioned to mediate between citizen and state in a way that works to relegitimize a political order in crisis” (Cruikshank 1999, 68). This is also similar to what the Office of Economic Opportunity tried to do during the War on Poverty. They sought “a permanent increase in the capacity of individuals, groups, and communities afflicted by poverty to deal effectively with their own problems so that they need no further assistance” (73). Certainly this is not the intent of childcare collectives, but the possibility that they may be unintentionally supporting the rolling out of self-government and the rolling back of government assistance, is something that has lingered on my mind throughout this project. It is a question that will not fade away, and indeed could be asked about many community and political organizations. It will be an important question to engage with as people try to formulate and understand alternatives to capitalism.

Ultimately, a main goal of this thesis is to connect care and political organizing in a way that is both productive and reproductive of political alternatives. I want to contribute to the theorization of care ethics in a way that is material and politically applicable, by connecting it to the actions of real political organizations that will continue to organize and act long after this research is over. I hope that this research will encourage others to think about what care has to offer a politics of resistance. I also hope that this research can be used to argue for the centrality of care in both political theory and practice, and also in research methodology. I truly believe that in order to pull the left out of its defeatist malaise, we need to re-invigorate political resistance with playful, spontaneous, and convivial engagements that cannot be captured and reorganized by neoliberal capitalism. We also need to become comfortable with practicing care as an

everyday activity that is both necessary to our daily reproduction, and necessary to producing counter-hegemonic conducts that will challenge the dominant paradigms, as well as envelope them, rupture them, and create something new.

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