Mundane Yet Powerful:

The Meso-Level of the Political, Transformative Justice and Rethinking Social Change

[This is a rough thinking through of a new book project]

In this paper I would like to claim the importance of the Black feminist movement of Transformative Justice in allowing us to think differently about social change. While more can be said about this issue, this particular paper is part of a larger project. What I would like to concentrate on in this paper is five claims. In laying out these claims I try to show the importance of what is called the "meso-level" of the political. I follow Lisa Herzog's naming of "meso" (2018), but Diana Coole, a phenomenologist, also calls this level variously the "middle region", "interstitial space" and "the realm of the inbetween" (2005, 128 and 139). This meso region is the level of the political that is "above" the level of individual moral action, but is "below" the level of structural institutions. As a conceptual scheme, this is the level of affordances, self-transformation, habit, skill, capacity and affect. The meso-level of the political is different in kind because it operates at a different diachronic plane than either the structural or the individual political levels. Looking at the transformative justice movement through this framework, I also hope to show a means of social change that does not conform to the metaphors of rupture, sudden break or crisis. These metaphors are often used to illustrate the sudden social change of radical structural political movements.

I structure this paper around these five claims: Firstly that for the transformative justice movement, prison and police abolition involves moving from the affect of security to one of safety. Secondly, that racism and other oppressive obstacles to social change are buried deep within our habits and that if this is true, real social change takes on a different time than voting

for regime change or overturning institutions. This allows us to think about social transformation differently. Thirdly, that mutual aid is the central element of transformative justice that connects all the other elements. This is important because, I argue that the transformative justice movement is a mundane, in a normatively good way, movement and that because of this fourthly, we should not make the goal of mutual aid groups or transformative justice to scale up to the structural level of politics. I conclude with my fifth claim that this movement allows us to rethink what failure means in movement politics.

Although transformative justice has gained traction in the consciousness of Americans during the uprisings in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd, modern abolitionism has been a movement since the uprising at the Attica Correctional Facility in 1971. In 1976, a Quaker prison minister named Fay Honey Knopp published a founding text of the movement called *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionist.* But as Angela Davis, Beth Richie and Gina Dent argue in their new book, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, the genealogy of contemporary police and prison abolition has always centered Black and other women of colour feminists. Around 2001 in Oakland, California, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence was beginning to grow their network in challenging white feminist reliance on policing to solve domestic and other violence while the group Critical Resistance turned from a loose collective into a group united in abolishing the police and prison. Importantly though, the transformative justice movement was never a centralized movement. At around the same in elsewhere in California, Ruth Wilson Gilmore was working with "Mothers Reclaiming Our Children," a group of Latina mothers of people in California prisons who came together to support their incarcerated loved ones and fight collectively for their release. On the East coast Mariame Kaba in Chicago and Ejeris Dixon in New York were organizing ways to stay safe and hold one another accountable without having to

call the police, centering the experiences of those with non-normative genders or without immigration undocuments. So importantly, in the spirit of this genealogy, the main sources of this paper comes from mostly Black feminists and other women of colour.

Section 1: From Security to Safety

Miriam Kaba emphasizes that there is a conceptual difference between the affect of security which is our current status quo and the goal of abolition: the feeling of safety (2021). In her definition, security always involves the use of the violence of the state against poor Black and Brown, fungible, people. This is because, bundled together within the concept of security, this kind of violence is inextricably connected with ability to keep the few feeling protected. These few are those considered non-fungible by the state. As Kaba puts it, security as a concept is central because it is what keeps the "monsters" at bay. Yet in trying to achieve this, "these very tools and the corresponding institutions are reproducing the violence and horror they are supposed to contain" (Kaba 2021). As an affective goal it is not a precise quantitative objective, nor can it be one of policy either. One cannot legislate or force people through state violence to feel safe. One of the enduring questions of abolition is, if security involves a reproduction of violence and does not even give us robust justice, why are so many, even those who are targeted by this violence, so loyal to this feeling of security?

Ami Harbin in her new book *Fearing Together* (2023) concentrates on the affect of fear which I think gives a good account. Harbin argues, using Freudian psychoanalysis, that affect does not work in the way that we can just rationally not fear something. Though a mouse is a tiny creature as compared to me, affect is such that I cannot just will myself not to fear it. But also

what much political affect accounts miss is the influence of others close to us. We cannot solely blame the media, but we must also take into account the effect that those who immediately surround us have on our fears. Harbin argues that as a group we have a tendency to displace our fear of existential threats onto smaller more vulnerable and manageable seeming threats. This is in order to cope and continue on with our day to day lives. For example, I had a hard time convincing my students that children are much less likely to be kidnapped now than in the 1950s (Brennan 2016, 45). This is because they have, their whole lives, both been warned about "stranger danger" as well as inculcated the affective anxieties of their parents. And this affect often results in the targeting of, for example, homeless people with hostile architecture and leads to sex offender registries (Tyson 2014) so that a few can cope and feel secure.

Importantly, Harbin taps into one of the central principles of abolition, that security always involves some group being fungible. Our current system always finds someone to "throw under the bus" in order for a few to feel secure. Harbin's account gives us the reason that even if people rationally know that the status quo has brought us to the crisis of police killing Black people and the mass incarceration of over 2 million, this data is never enough to tip most into changing the system. Harbin shows us that displacement onto some group is *necessary* for our affective feeling of security.

While I appreciate Harbin's work on this, I argue that the trouble of moving from the affect of security to safety goes beyond this and must take into account concepts in the meso-level such as skill, habit and capacity. While the account of displacement is necessary, her account is not sufficient.

Miriam Kaba argues that security is an outsourcing of our problems from us as a community to the police (2021). I argue that this outsourcing is easier than doing this work

ourselves for two reasons. First, 911 has been habituated into us as the "one stop shop" of solving our problems. Without thinking, it is the first thing we reach for because there are no other concrete alternatives. So, we leave up to the police a myriad of problems we just don't want to deal with: from mental health, to homelessness to domestic violence. The second reason it is so easy to outsource our problems is that our skill and capacity for community building and interpersonal intervention has atrophied. This comes from the police's hydra-like ability to become the indispensable solution to more and more problems that they were never supposed to be the solution for. To build these skills and capacities, there needs to be opportunities. Yet each problem of the community that the police becomes the solution to becomes one less incentive for average people within the community to get to know each other and entangle themselves in other people's lives. I take seriously here Ejeris Dixon's call that "we must practice community safety as we would practice an instrument or a sport" (2020). This can seem like a very basic point. But Transformative justice organizers ask that if we look around at our society, do any of us know how or have the simple capacity to give a good apology? The only way to wean ourselves off our dependency on 911 and the police is to connect people with different skills and disseminate these skills across the community.

Kaba argues that while you can have security without strong empathic relationships, safety has a necessity of healthy relationships. This is because for instance, you have to *feel* safe enough and interpersonally invested but also comfortable with your neighbours in order to knock on that door and intervene (Kaba 2021). This feeling of safety must be there so that one is reliably certain that violence won't be visited upon the person intervening. This takes time, work and practice. The problems of security should not be attributed all to the individual. There are often structural and material obstacles that enervate the ability to practice these skills. One

example is the ennui of suburban areas that "nudge" neighbours toward alienation. But the practice is worth it. Dixon relates that with this work and practice in the community, that instead of habitually and automatically calling the police, people knew the medics and doctors to call for medical emergencies, also the people who could help with mental health. Dixon even tapped a bouncer from a club to help mentor and teach de-escalation skills.

Section 2: Racism and Oppression are Buried Deeply Within our Habits

As much work in the critical philosophy of race has taught us, neither formal, legal equality nor eliminating interpersonal racism can take us beyond racism. This is because these leave untouched the material history of such things as segregation, environmental and economic inequality. The Transformative justice movement argues that getting rid of racism by overturning institutions is also not enough. Transformative justice as a movement focuses on skills, habits and capacities because oppression, racism, and sexism are deeply ingrained in our bodies through habituation and as I have shown, our affects. The meso-level of political life is often ignored because most moral thinkers concentrate on the interpersonal level while most political thinkers concentrate on the structural. I argue that political life is not exhausted by those two levels and that there is a level above the interpersonal yet below the structural that can help us understand transformative justice in its most compelling form.

That it is deeply engrained in our bodies, through habits and affects has descriptive consequences. John Dewey best illustrates this with a quote from his book *Human Nature and Conduct*. Here Dewey's target is what he calls "short-cut revolutionists" who think that revolution is paradigmatically when institutions are overturned. He argues that the person who advocates for this kind of revolution "fails to realize the full force of the things about which he

talks most, namely institutions as embodied habits. Anyone with knowledge of the stability and force of habit will hesitate to propose or prophesy rapid and sweeping social changes. A social revolution may effect abrupt and deep alterations in external customs… But the habits that are behind these institutions… are not so easily modified… The force of lag in Human life is enormous. (Dewey 1922, 108)"

Kaba illustrates this point in relation to the transformative justice movement when she cites one of the touchstones of the movement, Angela Davis. Kaba paraphrases Davis and argues that even those of us who are conscious of the ideological influence on our emotional life are still subject to it. The retributive impulses of state punishment are inscribed in our very individual emotional responses (Kaba 2021, xiii). Secondly, when we set about trying to transform society, we must remember that we ourselves will also need to transform. Our imagination of what a different world can be is limited. We are deeply entangled in the very systems we are organizing to change. White supremacy, misogyny, ableism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia exist everywhere. We have all so thoroughly internalized these logics of oppression that if oppression were to end tomorrow, we would be likely to reproduce previous structures (Kaba 2021, 4).

Dewey's argument is rooted in a descriptive claim about the nature of human embodiment and affect. That it takes effort, strategy and time to change habits and emotions but if we do achieve these capacities, it might drive more *enduring* forms of transformation (Pedwell 2016, 14).

Section 3: Transformative Justice is not just Oppositional but a Positive Project

Traditionally, radical change is thought of as a revolutionary alteration that punctuates human history. Rather than gradual or ongoing, revolution is thought of as a single structural

event that causes a break with past institutions. Radical social change is often descriptively conceived as a single moment of rupture, as "the apocalyptic showdown followed by the sudden miraculous irruption of a totally different kind of human and social relations" (Lordon 2014). I argue that the Transformative justice movement gives us a different way to move toward a truly new future. Maggie Nelson gives an account of the difference between the former and latter concept as the difference between liberation, conceived of as a momentary act, and practices of freedom, conceived of as ongoing. She elaborates that "moments of liberation - such as those of revolutionary rupture, or personal 'peak experiences' - matter enormously, insofar as they remind us that conditions that once seemed fixed are not, and create opportunities to alter course, decrease domination, start anew. But the practice of freedom - i.e. the morning after, and the morning after that - is what, if we're lucky, takes up most of our waking lives… [an] experiment unending (Nelson 2021, 7)

Mariam Kaba, building on the work of Kwame Ture, cautions that social movements should not just concentrate on destroying an oppressive system. A movement that never talks about building or creating does not reach the normative standard of truly revolutionary. Prison abolition "is a positive project that focuses, in part, on building a society where it is possible to address harm without relying on structural forms of oppression" (Kaba 2021, 2). As well, Deva Woodly argues that these movements are "often misperceived as merely a reaction against police brutality. On the contrary, M4BL is based on a rich and dynamic political philosophy" (Woodly 2021, 49).

To more concretely illustrate these abstract points, a misconception of the transformative justice movement's immediate goals is that it would be a victory if at this very moment all the prison doors were to be opened and all the prisoners would be set free (Chua 2020, 140; McLeod

2015, 1161). We must remember from the previous section that the positive project of prison abolition is the building of alternative embodied institutions through building and working on skills, habits and affect. As I claimed, the vision here is of self-transformation as social transformation. The problem is that as communities we do not have the habituation or skills to move from security to safety yet. In our current paradigm of security, merely opening all the prison doors would in fact be a disaster.

Allegra McLeod argues that the word "abolition" in "prison abolition" invokes the initial project as well as overcoming the failures of slave abolition. As W.E.B. DuBois points out, part of the problem of the transition and failure of reconstruction to the erection of Jim Crow was that true abolition became an unfinished project. "Abolition instead required the creation of new democratic forms in which the institutions and ideas previously implicated in slavery would be remade to incorporate those persons formerly enslaved and to enable a different future for all members of the polity" (McLeod 2015, 1162). Kaba's goal of "safety" through community skill building represents the slow building of these new institutions and capacities.

Tying this to the previous section, the view of social change as rupture, recalls Dewey's argument that if we truly want revolutionary social change (not just "short-cut" revolutions that fail) we must consider the diachronically thick movement as well as lag in habitual change of humans. This gives us a view of social change not as rupture but more as creative habituation. As Benjamin Dalton describes this different way of looking at social change: "This is a different vision of changing norms. One not breaking with a tradition, but of perfecting mastery over one. When experts train over many years and become skilled and sensitize their habits, habits can be pushed to new heights of creativity. Habit does not have to be interrupted to be creative because creativity can be grounded on the perfection of routine through training. Instead of an inadequate

tool for which creativity must intercede, habit can become an actual foundation for creative action" (Dalton 2004, 609).

Section 4: The Centrality of Mutual Aid and the Importance that it is Mundane

All of these points manifest themselves in the centrality of mutual aid for transformative justice. Mutual aid makes concrete the general principle that no one is fungible. As Dean Spade defines it, mutual aid is "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them" (2020, 12). Mutual aid builds new social relationships that recognize that we actually have a stake in each other, that we are interrelated and interconnected. Because mutual aid fills in the gaps of ways different states have let down their most vulnerable people, there is no *a priori* way of knowing what form mutual aid will take. Spade lists an eclectic variety of forms such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, raising money for people on strike, leaving drinking water for migrants who are trying to cross in the desert and most famously, the children's breakfast program by the Black Panther party. The scale of mutual aid does not have to be grand or complicated. More connected to prison abolition, it can be something as simple as helping arrange rides for family to visit prisoners or coordinating letter-writing to inmates.

While the work that gets done and people who are helped are central, mutual aid can help show us the meso-level of politics, where the structural and self-transformation meet. Unlike something like restorative justice, transformative justice is focussed on the interplay between the two spheres of interpersonal and structural. If we do not focus on this interplay, one just ends up focusing on the interpersonal and not on transforming conditions (Kaba 2021, 149).

With this focus on the meso-level in mind, we must realize that the skills and community capacity built as a side effect of working together in mutual aid is important part of transformative justice and not just epiphenomenal. Kaba emphasizes that "I really wouldn't be doing this only as a political project if it wasn't also transforming me in the process of doing this work with other people" (2021, 145). In this section, I want to focus on the down to earth, mundane skills that can be built with mutual aid in three ways and then argue that mutual aid is also important for unlearning habits and finally show concretely that the relationships built can save lives.

The ways North American cities and suburbs are built already motivate us toward atomism, so merely finding a milieu for interacting with those in the community already raises trust that might later be tapped for mutual support in a crisis. As I have tried to argue, community building is a skill that must be practiced, as Dixon argues, like a sport or instrument. Connections must be made that are not limited to "pettiness, gossip, cliquishness, which can be so fun and then so destructive. We get skilled at critique that deepens us, conflict that generates new futures, and healing that changes material conditions" (maree brown 2020, 7).

Beyond the skills of making a community founded on different relations, the second mundane skill learned through mutual aid is the new capacities for dealing with conflict. Activists stress this with a metaphor of building the "muscle" of accountability. For maree brown, this is where mutual aid overlaps with Marxist theories of prefiguration. Mutual aid becomes a living model of abolition. It becomes a laboratory for struggle in a principled way and a place to practice accountability beyond punishment with each other (2020, 7). Maree brown emphasizes the self transformation aspect by talking about becoming "excellent at being in conflict" (2020, 7). It involves skill and practice because in our current society, we aren't given

basic tools with which to process temper or strong emotions. How do we build basic communication skills, how do we build the skill set to give a good apology, what does it look like to have generative conflict with people in our everyday lives?

Thirdly, I want to show how all this skill is not just interpersonal but connects to the structural in tangible ways. Spade gives the example of people who might enter a mutual aid project together to "help one another through housing court proceedings will learn the details of how the system harms people and how to fight it, but they will also learn about meeting facilitation, working across differences, retaining volunteers, addressing conflict, giving and receiving feedback, following through, and coordinating schedules and transportation" (Spade 2020, 18). But importantly, all of this takes practice and it takes the time it takes to get good at anything. Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha argue that one of the failures of doing this work effectively is the arrogance of assuming "we have the skills to address harm simply because we have a strong political analysis or a strong desire to address harm. There's a substantial distinction between having skills and learning skills, between being experts and practicing" (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020, 16).

This kind of arrogance is learned and so on top of these three concrete ways of building skills, mutual aid helps *unlearn* skills since we never come to anything *tabula rasa*. One obstacle to the change of habits, claims James Bernard Murphy, is what he calls "habit interference." We already come to any new event with all of our previous experiences and habits and this means we not only have to learn a new task, but erase the impression on us of our old way of being. "The best-studied and most terrifying example of habit interference concerns the controls of an airplane: what pilots learn on one kind of plane often interferes with their ability to learn new cockpit controls. This interference is a major cause of airplane crashes" (Murphy 2015, 8).

Michael Puett, a scholar of Chinese virtue ethics, argues that the role of ritual space is to help break old habits. Ritual spaces specifically are places where we act out counter intuitive ways of thinking, acting and responding. And it is precisely the tension between rituals and our lived reality that render them effective (Puett 2015, 547). As I have stated earlier, mutual aid can be a laboratory for new norms, a ritual space that give us what Puett calls the space of the "as if". There we act "as if" the world really was ordered in a particular normative way (2008). Within the time we are doing mutual aid, there is a kind of transubstantiation of making the ritual into a reality for that place and for that time. But of course, this only lasts as long as we follow it in the right way and everyone acts within the norms established by mutual aid so the spell is not broken.

Importantly to those who have worked for years on transformative justice, this kind of skill building literally saves lives. It happens in the way I have already argued in that building this skill literally is social transformation. What it builds back is the enervated capacity outsourced to 911 (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020, 10). So, while Marxist theories of social change argue that prefigurative politics[1] allows us to prepare for the moment of structural social change, my central claim is that what transformative justice shows us is that *self-transformation is social transformation.* Importantly this dissolves one of the biggest criticisms of this kind of "micropolitics" from more structurally focused Marxists. The accusation is that continually preparing for social change is a distraction from organizing for that big moment of social change. This is because it focuses on ethics and lifestyle and is too rooted in the status quo

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[1] Prefigurative politics is can be defined narrowly as a Marxist strategy to develop organizations that embody structures of deliberation and decision-making that the future society is supposed to contain. Or prefigurative politics can be defined more broadly about experiments in living utopianly in the shell of the current world where people are encouraged to begin creating the new world in all aspects of their daily lives. For more on the difference between these definitions see Paul Raekstad's *Revolutionary Practice and Prefigurative Politics: A Clarification and Defense* (2018).

and so we cannot mutual aid our way to revolution[2]. My pushback here is that every time we practice one of these skills, while infinitesimal, it makes one and one's community rely less on outsourcing this help. This move from security to safety has material impacts on city budgets and the allocation of funds to the police that could be used elsewhere.

Spade argued that for instance, they worked with Bodega cashiers and restaurant staff in a Brooklyn neighbourhood to provide a place for people to run for help if something is happening on the street. Importantly, these Brooklynites are certainly not prison abolitionists. While their political views may never align with our own, we can see the time taken with community building paid off as Spade's group was able to convince these people to pledge not to call the police. "This community-wide work of building long-term relationships increased those people's preparedness for helping people in need and de-escalating situations, which increased safety in the neighborhood" (Spade 2020, 41). Corroborating this evidence, Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha argue that, "time and time again, I've known people who were saved by the relationships they built. I've witnessed people selling drugs address and intervene in transphobic violence because of relationships. I know friends who've helped their neighbors escape from violent relationships based on the connections they have built together" (2020, 14).

Section 4.1: Transformative Justice is a Mundane Movement and the Dangers of "Scaling Up"

I argue that transformative justice is a mundane movement, but in a normatively good way. In a connected claim, I argue that the specific diachrony of habitual change and skill

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[2] This is put most trenchantly by Kenny Lake in his "Malcolm X Didn't Dish Out Free Bean Pies" (2020). For a different argument from the perspective of Marxist feminism see Rhiannon Lindgren's "The Limits of Mutual Aid and the Promise of Liberation within Radical Politics of Care".

building is a strong methodological reason to think about *not* scaling up transformative justice to solve structural problems. I argue that the meso-level of politics does not *replace* work that changes structures, that in fact those in the transformative justice movement argue that they work in concert with movements that want to change institutions.

Mariame Kaba's rhetorical framing for all of our involvement in mutual aid goes beyond the argument that there are already communities that rely on it because they cannot call the police. Kaba argues that all of us are in fact already doing some type of mutual aid work within our lives already. We are never a blank slate of no skill, if we are within some sort of community, you already have some skills because you have at least some people in your lives that you can count on for support and who can count on you. As Spade argues, one of the epistemologically transformative aspects of mutual aid is that in being involved, one "may also learn that it is not just lawyers who can do this kind of work, and that many people—including themselves!—have something to offer. This departs from expertise-based social services that tell us we need to have a social worker, licensed therapist, lawyer, or some other person with an advanced degree to get things done" (Spade 2020, 18). What we find out in the recent documentary of the Jane mutual aid movement to help women get abortions before the Roe v. Wade ruling was how empowering it was to find out that the person who they had originally used to give abortions was not a doctor. Knowing this broke the expertise mystique and from then on the women learned the skills themselves to do safe abortions.

I began this project motivated by my own struggles as a political philosopher teaching the problems of prison and policing in a philosophy of race class. After about six class hours learning about the vast structural and historical scale of policing and prisons, my class in the Fall of 2020, while initially enthusiastic had a kind of normative fatigue. What I mean by this is that

they felt paralyzed, as individuals, when comparing themselves to the scale of the problem. And so, I was pushed as a teacher to dedicate a class to explaining transformative justice in the best way I know how: through the meso-level of politics that focuses on habit and skill. There was quite motivational transformation in my class after because, I argue, that transformative justice is so mundane. Descriptively and normatively, there really is nothing stopping people from finding 3-5 friends and beginning a mutual aid group. Taking from the title, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, Angela Davis emphasizes one of the most important parts of the transformative movement's mundaneness is this focus on "Now."

It is not just the scale, but *when* human action can intervene on the current situation. Those in the transformative justice movement contrast the simplicity and effectiveness over time of starting mutual aid with what I will call the single interpersonal political act. Here my students, and I intuit many others, were dissatisfied with calls to vote correctly and in numbers once every two or four years. As they were in South Carolina, they felt that this was a particularly futile type of single action. And although they were of younger age and connected to social media, they were also disillusioned with the more symbolic single action of showing support by say for instance, changing their Instagram profile to a black square.

On the other side, and what might be a more controversial claim, they were also dissatisfied with their actions that might overturn institutions. Many in my class were on the front lines in the Summer of 2020 but by the Spring of 2021 were feeling both that political energy was dissipating but also wondering, after all of that, if concretely anything had changed. It seemed that police budgets were increasing rather than decreasing in backlash. Put more theoretically, for Marxists, for the individual's actions to be effective at the structural level, one must wait for objective social and material conditions or moments of crises. But for the prison

and police abolition movement, words like crises and "objective social" conditions seem to only manifest in the anger around another murdered Black person. People seem only receptive to big movement change when another outrage like Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd or more recently Tyre Nichols happens. As Olufemi O. Taiwo argues in the conclusion to his book *Reconsidering Reparations*, the timescale and diachronic thickness of structural social change involves acting like our own ancestors. The stark fact that "some generations plant the trees, leaving it to others to build the barrels and taste what they brew" (Taiwo 2022, 208) I've noticed while helpful, this outlook on social change can be paralyzing to action. This is why I think an attractive part of transformative justice is the mundaneness of the movement. Anyone can, even after this session, start or join a mutual aid group, now.

Importantly, I want to again emphasize that while I am normatively arguing that the meso-level of politics is more effective toward social change than single actions or interpersonal change, I want to stress that I don't think there is a conflict between the meso-level and the structural level of politics. I think they need each other. I think the meso-level of politics is important because it is more diachronically thin than the structural level. One way to describe becoming a virtuoso at something is to think of it as a concatenation of single actions. Yet anyone who has become very good at something, such as playing a violin, will understand that at some point, practice makes playing that instrument different in kind than merely aggregating single time slices of actions together. This is what I mean by the meso-level being above the level of the interpersonal. But also, the diachronic thickness of the meso-level is importantly *below* the span of a lifetime and so thinner than the diachronic thickness of structural change. Social change in the meso-level takes the time it takes to learn something by pushing one's limits

but also practicing your weaknesses. While it may take thousands of hours, this skill and capacity building is doable within a lifetime.

These unique features of the meso-level of politics, that its diachronic thickness is thick enough to make for effective social change but not too thick to no longer be mundane, are some of the main reasons why I think it's important that we don't expect the goal of transformative justice and mutual aid to "scale-up" to the structural level. The argument of transformative justice is *not* that mutual aid's goal is to replace structural institutions. It is instead a tool to enervate our dependency on police and prisons by building new skills and capacities. We cannot solve local problems by enacting sweeping federal, one size fits all changes. Structural and institutional change through changing laws is necessary, but never sufficient and so it is important to protect the integrity of the meso-level of the political. For Angela Davis and others, what forms at this level is a kind of abolition feminist "ecology" which emerge from everyday practices, collective experiments and sinewy networks that crisscross time and space (2022).

Just as I separated the concept of security from safety, so here I want to separate the concept of "sustainability" as our goals for the structural level from the meso-level concept of "resilience".

What we want from our structural institutions is permanence. We want, for instance, the expectation of access to reproductive justice to have infinite sustainability with no backsliding. We want our structural goals to be like a valve so that we can build on past policies and institutions for generations. But I think we sneak these normative expectations into our work at the meso-level. We can see this when the biggest worry of mutual aid is burnout and so we attempt to turn these meso-level movements into structural movements by formalizing and institutionalizing. One of Dean Spades' more controversial claims is that social movement work

shouldn't be paid[3]. His main argument is that money both institutionalizes but also makes the movement beholden to those holding the purse strings. Although the movement can now afford to permanently pay enough people to maintain sustainability, it no longer does the meso-level work that it set out to do.

Again, while I agree that these movements are most vulnerable to burnout or the grief of interpersonal friction and failure, what we must aim for is resilience rather than sustainability. Spade makes the point that sometimes a group comes together, does work over the time of a number of years and that it is not only normatively acceptable for the group to split or disband, but I would argue this is the correct timescale for meso-level activities. It is not just negative things that break these small groups, but more positive things such as maybe actually meeting the modest goal a mutual aid group set out to do or the changes people want to make in organizing because their training and capacity has transformed them as a person. A point that Spade makes is that splitting as a group means that both groups will fill different niches. All of these I think would be seen as a failure of structural movements, but as I will show in the next part, the meso-level, when we don't sneak in our assumptions about infinite sustainability as the goal can change our ideas of failure.

Conclusion (Section 5): A Different View of Failure

I want to conclude by showing how transformative justice as a movement lodged in the meso-level of the political can show us a different vision of failure. Abolitionist Charmaine Chua states bluntly "the left is so used to losing" (2020, 141). Here she focuses on the tangible,

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[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yh13U-aVEGI

structural results of the summer of 2020 protests. The seemingly largest victory was reported in

Minneapolis, the epicentre of the movement and where George Floyd was murdered. Reports

were that the city was going to cut the police budget and move that money elsewhere. But Chua

cautioned that "less than two months after the city council's pledge, an unelected and

unrepresentative City Charter Commission voted to prevent a ballot measure to lower the

number of police in Minneapolis" (2020, 131). From the vantage of 2023, we know that in fact

most police budgets have gone up. Many cannot help but feel this was a complete failure. I argue

that it is only a failure if we look at it from the framework of tangible goals expressed in budgets

and policies: the framework of structural politics.

As Chua concludes, "our best hope for radical change does not flow through the city

council or legislative process, but through building our own autonomous capability of resisting

the police" (2020, 131). In the timeframe of the meso-level, movement is not linear but instead

moves with the rhythms of habits and practicing: reiterative cycles. Skills are retained, bad habits

were unlearned new ones came about. People dispersed but as it is easy to relearn how to ride a

bike, those people took their embodied know-how with them. The social form of skill

transmission also portably travels with these people wherever they go, ready to be passed on to

others who can potentially teach others. They continue to carry those skills with them as

embodied know-how. Through communities of practice, skills that were considered very hard or

impossible, such as the double somersault was in 1908 in diving, is considered standard for

novices today. Importantly, skills are rarely contained by some lone genius but instead like Lynn

Hankinson Nelson's feminist epistemological argument, the knowledge resides within the entire

epistemological community. What was previously seen as an unbeatable feat has certain

learnable techniques and methods of practice. Once these ways are taken up by the community,

these previous "avant-garde" norms become standard baselines. It can be easily forgotten that what we now do normally was at one point considered pushing the norm. Anders K. Ericsson gives the example of Alfred Cortot in the 1930s who was one of the best-known classical musicians in the world whose recordings of Chopin were considered the definitive interpretation. Today teachers offer up his performance as one example of how not to play Chopin because of the sloppiness and missed notes. Merely professional pianists are expected to perform his work with more elan and technical skill than Cortot did. "Indeed, Anthony Tommasini, the music critic at the New York Times, once commented that musical ability has increased so much since Cortot's time that Cortot would probably not be admitted to Juilliard now" (Ericsson 2017, 24)

I want to conclude with Helen Hudson's interview with Chris Dixon for the journal "Upping The Anti"[4]. Hudson, a queer Abolition organizer from Montreal explains the importance of the concept of the elder and the importance to movements of the building, retaining and teaching of skills built up: "Most of the time [being an elder] will mean people who are older but what's key for me in the concept is people who have been organizing longer, people who have seen things in organizing that others maybe haven't seen yet… One of the things that keeps movements down is having to reinvent the wheel and not having a sense of history. We can partly address this by having institutions, but we also need to connect with people from whom there are lessons to be learned… I think there are concrete skills that need to be shared and need to be passed on. One form of leadership is considering it a central political responsibility to pass on what has been learned" (2009). Here, success means making sure elders are involved in skill transmission so that one does not start again continually but instead pushes one's habits and skills to new creative and virtuosic performances. The goal is such that what

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[4] https://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/08-movements-where-people-can-grow1/

was considered impossible in the past becomes routine in an analogy to double somersaults in diving were considered too dangerous for the Olympics but now by high-school, thanks to communities of practice, training methods and coaching, by high school the best divers are doing four and a half somersaults (Ericsson 2017, 23). In the same way, although it would be an utter disaster if we were to open all the jails right now, our community skills can also, over not many generations can be pushed further. What we learn from other domains of increase of skill and expertise is that we may even, retrospectively look back at our general lack of skill at intervening at, for example, domestic violence and wonder how people back then weren't able to do this. This is the mundane, yet powerful goal of transformative justice, working through the meso-level of politics.

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