



“Moving On” from the Ongoing

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Before it had happened, it had happened and happened.

—*Claudia Rankine on Rodney King’s beating, in Citizen: An American Lyric (2014)*

On March 18, 2018, Stephon “Zoe” Clark was shot in his grandmother’s backyard 20 times, at least six in the back, by two Sacramento Police officers. In the resulting community-led protests, shutdowns, and ceremonies, the 23-year-old father of two has been poignantly mourned for the singular person he was, while his name joins the litany of African-American men, women, boys and girls who have been victims of police aggression and homicide. These names have become metonymic for the Black Lives Matter movement against racialized state violence.



Sage combined with signs to protest a string of police killings among the Latinx community in Salinas, California. Megan Raschig

But in addition to those names we know sadly too well, Clark’s killing immediately made me think of Frank Alvarado. Alvarado was shot by Salinas Police Department officers in the dark early hours of July 10, 2014, on his grandfather’s front lawn in East Salinas, California. Similar to Clark, he held only a cell phone in his hand at the time, which police claimed to recognize as a gun. Alvarado was the fourth of four Latino men shot and killed by the Salinas Police Department on separate occasions over a four-month span of 2014. Four men. Four months. In a town of 155,000. I happened to be living in this Central Coast town conducting my doctoral research with two Chicax healing collectives during this period. These healing collectives became central to the local activist response. Tracing their powerful approach illuminates how Latinx populations in California address their particular conditions of state terror in ways aligned with, yet distinct from, the better-known Black Lives Matter tactics. However, much of my colleagues’ activism seems to have cooled since this period in 2014. And nearly four years on, Alvarado’s name is not widely known beyond Salinas, nor has the issue of police homicides of Latinx populations come to occupy significant space in the national political imaginary.

Salinans’ “moving on” means something else. It indexes a deeper dismay and exhaustion that exceeds the homicides themselves: the sense that as these killings keep happening, nothing seems to change.

Discomfited by the resonance between Clark’s and Alvarado’s deaths, I wondered what juxtaposing the two could illuminate about imagining and organizing for meaningful police reform in California, the seemingly progressive but deeply carceral state that Ruth Wilson Gilmore aptly termed the “Golden Gulag” (2007). Hearing from a colleague in Salinas about the muted response to Clark’s death—that Salinans had “moved on” from an issue that cut them so deeply—I was quickly reminded of the work it takes to disentangle possibility from aching disappointment. How do we make sense of the moves that terrorized communities make, and the forms of moving on they sometimes adopt in the wake of such devastation—such as electing for a kind of self-preservation rather than exhaustive struggle when *these things just keep happening*? How does one keep imagining and organizing in the face of the state’s resilience in obscuring and legitimizing its violence?

From my office at the University of Virginia, I asked Joaquin Magón, a journalist and organizer trained by the United Farmworkers Union, about the reflections in Salinas on Clark’s killing. He quickly responded that it was not really a topic of conversation, that folks in Salinas had “moved on from the 2014 convo” about police killings. This “moving on,” however, is not complacency. Nor by any means does it reflect satisfaction with the numerous reforms launched in the wake of these

deaths. These reforms were borne of a federal Department of Justice investigation, which reported severely eroded relations between the police and Latinx community. This investigation seemed to take the killings seriously, but the reforms it funded have not met their potential. No, Salinans’ “moving on” means something else. It indexes a deeper dismay and exhaustion that exceeds the homicides themselves: the sense that as these killings keep happening, nothing seems to change. With the California attorney general now investigating Clark’s death, a similar set of outcomes may yet be reached in Sacramento. It’s worth pausing here on the potential of such attention and intention, in the hopes that—whatever solutions are proposed in Sacramento—they do not meet the same disappointing and enervating ends.

The federal investigation in Salinas made a number of recommendations, including the implementation of new community policing programs and the formation of a healing-informed platform for governance that would link state agents and community members in municipal decision-making. The latter reform, the “Governing for Racial Equity” (GRE) partnership, held promise for meaningful repair of these relations, and not just as a means of cultivating a one-sided ethos of empathy for the police (as was the case with the community policing programs [Raschig forthcoming in *Journal for the Anthropology of North America*]). The GRE centered spiritual healing discourses and practices that were already resonant in this city. A political framework of healing, organized by Chicana healing collectives MILPA and La Colectiva de Mujeres, rendered the fight against state violence sacred, linking ancestral wounds of New World colonialism with contemporary Latinx criminalization. Healing has thus figured as a compelling local inflection of an immanent “Brown Lives Matter” movement.

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In centering on healing, the GRE seemed to have been captured by it, a move that many people in the collectives found promising and conciliatory rather than co-optive. It opened space (in theory) for all in the city to acknowledge different affective responses to these homicides, transforming them into a shared ground that could also be used to launch novel reparative relationships and projects. However, nearly four later with little to show for its efforts, the GRE’s reparative potential has waned. State violence in its more covert expressions, like disingenuous policies that preserve conditions of lethal disparity, keeps happening. And thus Salinans’ “moving on,” as Joaquin put it, indicates “an exhausting reality where to remember is to feel disappointment which is a form of pain.” To let the news of Clark’s death really take hold would be to render oneself susceptible to what remains too terrifying to fully acknowledge: the loss of Alvarado and three other men; Angel Ruiz, Osmar Hernández, and Carlos Mejía; and the ever-present risk of others joining that list at the

hands of an already too-treacherous state. As long as Salinans “don’t get the experience of being able to imagine and organize towards a new world,” Joaquin said, “then we will be stuck with that pain.”

Jarrett Zigon (2017) has argued that disappointment is the starting point for rethinking our political possibilities, but disappointment also *hurts*. It can erode whatever surplus energy might be made available to imagine and pursue how the world might be made otherwise. Imagination is work—deceptively hard work, Joaquin reminded me: “as [my] buddy Paolo [Freire] would say,” imagining that comes easily will only skirt the limits of the oppressor’s possibilities. He continued, “We can imagine [the world] in a different way, but it requires some work.” He and I read Salinans’ apparent disinterest as a praxis in Freirian terms, reflection-fueled action, as a refusal to let something exhaust or disappoint any more than it already has, because this community’s expectations are already so low. This is not a disaffected shrug but a sigh, a “pathway to breath” as an affirmation of life (Rankine 2014, 60). Breath has been denied of men like Clark, Alvarado, and of course Eric Garner, whose repetition of *I can’t breathe* while being suffocated by NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo in 2014 stands as the profound call of the widespread movement against police violence. Such a sigh, as Claudia Rankine writes, is also the “worrying exhale of an ache.”

Joaquin then urged me to re-read chapter one of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000). I am sending him a copy of Rankine’s *Citizen* (2014).

I like to imagine that when interlocutors like Joaquin and I trace the scars of state violence in the lives of those it terrorizes, we might be doing something to support the world-making work of everyday endurance in places like East Salinas or South Sacramento. But this too might just be skirting the limits of the oppressor’s imaginative range as well. Otherwise this is hard and full-bodied work; it has to come from “human hands which work and, working, transform the world” (Freire 2000, 27). If anything else is to happen, it is going to take more: acknowledging and working from that ache while nurturing projects that make persistence possible in order to sustain resistance. Because we agree this cannot keep happening, and we also need the space to sigh when it does.

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