

Violence is arrayed against us because we're Black, or female, or queer, or undocumented. There is no rescue team coming for us. With that knowledge, we need a different operational base to recreate the world. It is not going to be a celebrity savior. Never was, never will be. If you're in a religious tradition that is millennia-old, consider how the last savior went out. It was always going to be bloody. It was always going to be traumatic. But there's a beauty to facing the reality of our lives. Not our lives as they're broken apart, written about, and then sold back to us in academic or celebrity discourse. But our lives as we understand them. The most important thing is showing up. Showing up and learning how to live by and with others, learning how to reinvent ourselves in this increasing wasteland. That's the good life.

*Joy James's Revolutionary Love is umph-degree love; or love beyond measure. It is anything love. It is love without reckoning. It is love that dares all things, beyond which others may find the spirit-force to survive; to live to fight another day. Such love is also fighting itself, for the sake of ensuring that others may live. — Mumia Abu-Jamal*

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With a foreword by Da'Shaun L. Harrison  
and an afterword by Mumia Abu-Jamal.

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teaches at Williams College,  
Williamstown, Massachusetts.

JOY JAMES IN PURSUIT OF REVOLUTIONARY LOVE



Joy James



# In Pursuit of Revolutionary Love

Precarity, Power, Communities

# IN PURSUIT OF REVOLUTIONARY LOVE

To take the path of Revolutionary Love is to take a risk. It means walking the razor's edge. This is not a politics of the heart, not a politics of charity. No need for self-love or self-pity—it's enough to know where you stand, to embody that moment "just before the hate," and, with the energy of despair, to ward off the worst. —Houria Bouteldja, author of *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*

Rooted in community activism and the ways in which "history is always instructive," Joy James is clear that she is "always thinking about and in the community." *In Pursuit of Revolutionary Love* is a beautiful and effective articulation and representation of those commitments.

—Kathryn Sophia Belle, author of *Beauvoir and Belle: A Black Feminist Critique of The Second Sex*

Rich, rigorous, poetic, and accessible, this is a book I will return to again and again for guidance and affirmation, a reminder of the interconnectedness of all who resist oppression, of all who despair, of all who live for Revolutionary Love.

—Yassmin Abdel-Magied, author of *Talking about a Revolution*



Joy James

IN  
PURSUIT OF  
REVOLUTIONARY  
LOVE

Precarity, Power, Communities



DIVIDED



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*To my beautiful, fierce sister Selemawit Terrefe, who insists that we  
fight to chart a path for our flights into Revolutionary Love.*



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## Preface: Oshun's Flight

I do not seek to represent or dishonor any spiritual or religious traditions. If I err, please forgive. I merely note that thirst compels this writing.

I heard one story about the African orisha Oshun. I do not recall all the details so I embroider here to make my own political-ethical points. According to the griot, as the ambitious lofty conspired to overthrow the creator, they mocked Oshun who had refused to join in a coup or genuflect as a member of the political demimonde. Angered by the upstarts' challenges to authority, and the disorder of things, Spirit—Olodumare—withdrawed protections. Waters in skies and on lands dried up.

Oshun sided with the lower castes, dispossessed masses, animals and creatures dying from malnourishment, parched and perched amid poisoned and absent waters. Oshun so loved the world. Only the embodiment of the beauty of rivers and streams dared to fly to the heavens to petition Spirit for redress and aid for those suffering cracked earth under dry, burning skies. As Oshun flew closer to Spirit, the radiating sun took its toll. Their beautiful peacock-like feathers began to smolder, then burn and fall. Despite the agony, Oshun focused on the desperation of those left behind and so reached their destination.

Shorn of beautiful feathers, scorched and scarred with the ashen appearance of a gray vulture, Oshun stumbled from the torturous flight to approach Spirit. Oshun bowed. Spirit observed, then agreed to listen to Oshun petition on behalf of those betrayed by life, abandoned by gods, bereft with broken defenses, and left to ward off “leadership” alien to the needs of the mass.

Was it compassion or grace that led to respite from desertification? Or, was the catalyst the beautiful boldness wielded by a defiant orisha compelled to care? Whatever the

motivation, Spirit heard risk, love, and courage in the pleadings; and ceased to punish the mass for the crimes of arrogant challengers who sought to dethrone—and to imperialize—misery. Thwarted but unpunished, destructive wannabe gods continued to transgress for accumulations. Unforgiven, they were mostly forgotten except by the dishonored and desperate who recalled and recoiled from their violence. Ignoring the imbalance on the scales of justice, the heavens granted relief from pain by releasing rain to all as Spirit met our desperate needs for flowing waters.

The path of a worthy returnee is a painful sojourn. Oshun flew into scorching skies seeking to sabotage predators and authoritarianism and to serve the people. Taking flight as warrior, Oshun navigated sacrificial labor. Carried by the echo of protective spirits, Oshun's heartbeat became a radar for struggle. With(out) feathered beauty, their persistence fueled Revolutionary Love. Thus, the orisha returns wearing the radiance of agape. Reverence seeps through the labors of saints, ancestors, healers, doulas to fall upon captive communities and kin.

Survivors battle catastrophes unleashed by would-be gods—rapists, capitalists, overseers, imperialists, traffickers, abortion bounty hunters, prison guards, environmental desecrators, military-mercenaries, death squads. Survivors willing to hear the echoes of griot speaking love also coordinate flights and fights to ensure that—even when muddied—we remain within sacred waters.

Is Oshun's flight as tortured messenger a form of the Captive Maternal? Or is their labor to give birth to community care a "gift" from a transcendent deity? Are deities captives to agape? Do they (un)willingly suffer or are they emotionally and spiritually compelled to sacrifice? Can all forms of communities—deified, (de)humanized, demonized, cyborg—generate or produce Captive Maternals? Oshun is a sovereign. Sovereigns suffer, yet are captive to love. In the presence of agape, battles for life ensue.

The dread doula Ominira Mars tracks within struggling communities the emotions found in Oshun's flight. Mars's essay "Dear Mariame Kaba, Hope Is Not a Discipline" opens with a quote from the US-American organizer and educator Mariame Kaba, who has made significant contributions to abolitionism: "Hope doesn't preclude feeling sadness or frustration or anger or any other emotion that makes total sense. Hope isn't an emotion, you know? Hope is not optimism. Hope is a discipline . . . we have to practice it every single day."<sup>1</sup> In some ways, Kaba echoes Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1955 speech in Holt Street Baptist Church four days after Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat to a white man on a segregated Montgomery, Alabama bus on December 1, 1955: "My friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression . . . when they get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair . . . Now let us go out to stick together and stay with this thing until the end . . . yes it means sacrificing at points. But there are some things that we've got to learn to sacrifice for."

Beneath Kaba's quote, Mars posts:

Hope requires complete trust and confidence; it requires faith.

Faith grounds.

Faith is the foundation upon which both our desires and expectations reside.

Faith is at the root of our ability to hope.<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting on Kaba's contributions, conceding that hope is not an emotion, Mars describes hope as "a phenomenon of many emotions coexisting together." Mars asserts that we must recognize the impossibility of any project to render hope a "discipline" because hope as "(cap)ability" accrues through "power, privilege," yet systemic abuse, without transformative accountability or strategic efficacy to address anti-Blackness,

capitalism, and neocolonialism, leads people to lose faith in institutions and prominent leaders; hence, Mars argues, those lacking “*power, privilege, and/or capacity to hope* . . . become incapable of hope”:

Hope as a discipline becomes restrictive, monotonous, exhausting. We must be able to occupy a multifaceted consciousness and way of reasoning with what could be that makes room for both the pragmatic and the impossible. We must practice a regenerative and expansive hope, or else hope becomes contained only by what we assume and/or are told is not possible.<sup>3</sup>

Mars asserts that the capacity to “imagine beyond the carceral status quo” depends not on “liberatory imaginings” but on a “faith” that we can materialize what we imagine. Asserting that learning “hope as a discipline” mandates that we “lower our expectations of liberation,” Mars quotes Nicholas Brady: “paradoxically, the most hopeful people are those who have no hope in the system.” Mars argues: “We should not and will not discipline ourselves into hope. We will not build more tolerance for disappointment in violent institutions and systems built upon our erasure and pain. We will not police our doubt.” To move forward rather than become stuck in despondency or defeat, Mars advocates that we “embrace despair not as an end or an arrival point,” but as a “bridge” constructed without binaries.<sup>4</sup> This suggests to me that confidence shaped by skills and strategies is developed in communal *struggles* and also builds organizing that can frame and sustain movements. Such struggles are energized and amplified by engineering Revolutionary Love, not as “scientific” but as *sentient*. The spiritual nature of that love is embodied in agape disciplined by political will. Political will sustains this form of love even when one wishes its dissipation or dissolution in order to dodge the entanglements and suffering of liberation struggles. There exists the possibility that *despair*, rather than leading to nihilism or passivity and

indifference, could be a key catalyst to confrontational change. How else could Mamie Till-Mobley disturb psyches across the globe by demanding and obtaining an open-casket for the September 3, 1955 funeral—and allowing photographers to capture the horror-as-catalyst—for her fourteen-year-old son Emmett, who was sexually assaulted, tortured, and mutilated before being murdered by white supremacists on August 28, 1955? Mamie Till-Mobley *despaired*. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks expressed aspects of that despair and rage with rebellion when, reportedly while thinking of Emmett, she refused to give up her seat to a white man on a segregated bus. Catalysts in struggle that foment resistance are not always sparked by hope.

As do Marxists, materialists, and activists, Mars asserts that “one cannot ‘discipline’ themselves into the phenomena of hope without concrete material change.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, absent “concrete material change,” influencers and celebrities, as well as religious and community leaders, cannot discipline communities into hope when there are no material conditions to sustain it. Building on Mars’s contributions, I would however argue that it is *struggle* rather than “change” that serves as the catalyst for “disciplining” strategies. Struggles in the later stages of the Captive Maternal’s evolution lead to maroon camps or autonomous zones, sanctuaries and enclosures that make “hope” a possibility and a stable accelerant for liberation struggles. “Hope” can be used to extinguish revolutionary struggle, according to Mars, when leadership and platforms with the capacity to “discipline hope” often “depend on teaching self-regulatory violence to their ‘followers’”:

However, hope as a “discipline” in the face of ongoing systemic and institutional abuse (and modest material change) requires the weight of the psychological and/or emotional consequences of our conditions, and the task of nurturing feelings of “productive” expectation (in the midst of our ongoing suffering) dependent exclusively upon self-discipline. Hope should not be contingent upon

me (or those of us on the very margins) being able to (self) regulate/discipline in the face of violence; there is no honor, healing, and spaciousness in that.<sup>6</sup>

Reading Mars, I hear the generative and see the void as shaped by communal dialogue and interrogation, as well as negotiations structuring theory, politics, and strategies to further liberation movements through community connectors. In my graduate studies, I learned that democracy is based in discursive communication for the common good, according to the European political theorists Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt. Yet in Indigenous and diverse cultures, deities precede the demos. The recognition of their political will—if it has validity—is based not on their superpowers but on their capacity to receive and return love.

Oshun took flight not because they loved in the abstract and from on high, but because they reciprocated the love they received, not from other deities but from the mass. Neither pity nor emotional grandeur fueled Oshun's flight. Gratitude did. Oshun returned the love given by the mass that taught Oshun how to love. The origin story of Spirit within revolutionary struggle is the agency of the mass catalyzed by the gravitas of loss—healthy childhoods, clean air, fresh water, freedom, dignified life and death. Whatever Oshun's capacity, the political will of the people to endure and love shaped their flight plan. Oshun was the messenger; the message delivered was "Pursue Revolutionary Love."

For this writer, it is irksome that the image on this book's cover is catalogued as "Unidentified, *Fan for an Oshun Priestess*, 19th–20th century, Yoruba Peoples; The New Orleans Museum of Art: Museum purchase, Françoise Billion Richardson Fund, 90.306." Despite the "government name" issued by the museum and the capture of culture under colonization, this is not a plummet because we retain the capacity to reclaim and name Black beauty and Black Love as we continue to seek sovereign and communal freedom.

Notes to Preface

- 1    Kaba quoted in Ominira Mars, "Dear Mariame Kaba, Hope Is Not a Discipline," *Medium/Patreon*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/dear-mariame-is-65935224>.
- 2    Ibid.
- 3    Ibid.; emphasis in original.
- 4    Ibid.
- 5    Ibid.
- 6    Ibid.



## Open Letter To My Mom and Dad- From Peaches,

### Political Prisoner

Mom, Dad,

I'm communicating this way to you because it would take too much time and emotion on my part to do so through glass windows and ear phones.

Mom and Dad, you both have always wanted me to be someone you, others and most of all myself can look up to and respect. All my life I've been taught that people were people. All my life you have told me that no matter what I was or how I was, be the best.

Mom and Dad, I am a Panther, I am a revolutionary woman. I am willing to fight and die for the rights of myself, my people and all oppressed people in general. What greater pride can one have? How much dignity can one feel? How much respect can one receive, if he/she takes the initiative to go after and fight for a goal.

Mom and Dad, I love you both for striving and working and sweating so that I may have the things that I needed. I love you both for what you've taught me.

Sure, I could go out and hold any job I desire. Have all the luxuries in life, get set, and die of "natural" death.



**"PEACHES" - POLITICAL  
PRISONER**

But to me there is more life than that. There are the people. People who need to be helped and loved. Not stepped on, used, and misled as "we" have been for so long.

I have found what I've wanted out of life. I didn't find it in the streets, or through dope, or through luxuries. I found what I wanted through the Black Panther Party. And that is to "Love and Serve the People."

Please, Mom and Dad, I love you for what you are, and what you do. Can't you love me for what I am, and what I want to do?

**LOVE—Your only child  
"Peaches"**

Text and photo originally appeared in the *Black Panther Paper*, 1969.

# Afterword

Mumia Abu-Jamal

Joy James is thinking. Of course, this is nothing new. As a child, she would climb into a treehouse, open her books, and read to her heart's content, until she heard the call for dinner. Her latest work, *In Pursuit of Revolutionary Love: Precarity, Power, Communities*, is a brilliant exploration of American life at the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

I must say more: after reading this text, I found it not only brilliant, but groundbreaking, incisive, heartbreaking, critical, chilling, eye-opening, honest, and sobering. She questions, challenges, and critiques her profession, the site in which she works, herself even, as well as the ideas circulating in her academic milieu, such as feminism—specifically that as practiced by what she calls “imperial feminists,” who are apologists for war(s).

She is groundbreaking in this respect: she introduces the concept of the Captive Maternal, born of her conversations, observations, and interactions with Black mothers (and Brazilian ones!) who have lost their children to the impunities of state/police violence. These women have braved the threats and intimidations of state/police, who offer pay-outs for killed children, to which the mothers reply: “Return my child!” The Captive Maternal, James explains, is not an entity, so much as a social function, which performs as a source of love, caring, and nurturance of the oppressed, downtrodden, and dispossessed.

She begins her text with an almost poetic preface that centers on the Yoruba goddess-figure of Oshun, ruler of the rivers and waters, who implores the Creator God, Olodumare, to let the waters of the heavens flow because her beloved humans are suffering from aching thirsts and hunger because of drought. The Creator God, moved by her sacrifice as she soars close to the heat of the sun, singeing her feathers to serve

others, relents, and orders the waters to fall and flow again.

Here, James as thinker and writer imagines the Yoruba goddess as embodiment of the Captive Maternal ethic. James sees this form of expression (i.e., the Captive Maternal) as agender, or not any specific gender, but I thought the most impressive exemplar of the Captive Maternal was the freedom fighter we remember as Harriet Tubman, whom captives in the slave South knew as “Gen’ral Moses.” Tubman, born Araminta Ross, to this writer’s recollection, had no children of her flesh, but her loving and caring—and freedom works!—freed not only her mother, father, and most of her siblings, but literally hundreds of other captives of the slave South through her numerous treks there, perhaps most spectacularly during the Combahee River Raid in South Carolina during the heat of the US Civil War, when several hundred Black captives—men, women, and children—escaped from the clutches of their southern prison-state.<sup>1</sup> How many thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, are still living in US cities today because of the love and care of “Gen’ral Moses”?

Captive Maternals, James explains, are those who believe deeply in what she terms “Revolutionary Love.” James explains that “Revolutionary Love is difficult to define,” but its elements are that it secures “basic needs” for other oppressed persons (quoting Malcolm X here) “by any means necessary.” Captive Maternals are also those who live and practice Revolutionary Love, the “portal” to which is “lifelong education.” James isn’t here signifying her (or any other) university or college, but she intuits that her educators, her teachers, are people engaged in deep freedom struggles like mothers of state-slain children, political prisoners of the Empire, and those who resist white supremacy and racial capitalism. Captive Maternals are teachers—but not necessarily academics, she argues. James examines W.E.B. Du Bois’s classic work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and finds a basis of disagreement with his preference for what he called “the talented tenth,” or the 10 percent of educated Black elites who were to work for the “uplift” of Black Americans.

This analysis, which was based on a racial—as opposed to a class—analysis, ignored the simple fact that elites seek places close to other elites, for they aspire to the appurtenances of wealth and class rise, not to service. She shatters this shibboleth by the sheer power of her analysis.

Although the book contains several works written by her, she especially shines when she is in conversation with a wide array of thinkers—from feminists to nationalists to neo-radicals—who all seek her counsel and intellectual perspectives on the burning issues of the day. These conversations form the bulk of the text.

In some respects, James echoes the daunting tasks facing Black people as noted in the Afropessimism discourse, but she is not one for hopelessness. She hopes for a clarity that girds Black children, and awakens them to the life awaiting them in an anti-Black colonial settler-state (America). She finds strength, and political will, in the example(s) made by the Oakland-based Black Panther Party, which taught thousands of teens to live and work together in sometimes altruistic communes. Young men and women exemplified the Captive Maternal by feeding young schoolboys and girls across the country on a daily basis.

James does not bite her tongue; nor does she assume she knows the answer to every question. But after decades of work in America's elite colleges and universities, and continuing her studies in America's racial demimonde, she is still not afraid to say in live/taped conversations those three magical words: "I don't know." When was the last time you heard such a phrase from an academic?

James writes and especially speaks with a delightfully refreshing vibration. Her study of *Revolutionary Love* is a valuable contribution to radicals and revolutionaries looking for a way to survive the repression of the white-supremacist fear-state of America. Just don't depend on the current political system. As presently designed, it is frankly incapable of doing more than placing dark faces in high places, with the illusion

of representation its highest goal. James makes abundantly clear that both major political parties are imperialist, racist, and performative only in furtherance of corporate control and undying service. When it comes to subaltern movements, they are virtually useless, as she makes quite clear in her articles and discussions regarding the Black Lives Matter movement(s).

Finally, some thoughts about Revolutionary Love, which she regards as the highest form; she borrows here from the Greek theological idea of agape, “the love of others.” This love is expressed not by sweet words, or gestures, but by sacrifice for others. She cites the bold, revolutionary attack of Jonathan Jackson, for his big brother George, upon the Marin County Courthouse in San Rafael, California, on a sweltering day in August, 1970. Jon, then seventeen years of age, carried several weapons in, and brought several men out, in a bid to win freedom for his brother. The plot failed when cops opened fire on the van in the parking lot, killing everyone inside, including a judge being held hostage, as well as crippling an assistant district attorney. Jonathan, James argues, was a Captive Maternal, moved by great feelings of love to secure freedom for George and other brothers. She names other Captive Maternals, who exhibit several examples of extraordinary Revolutionary Love.

Revolutionary Love is umph-degree love; or love beyond measure. It is anything love. It is love without reckoning. It is love that dares all things, beyond which others may find the spirit-force to survive; to live to fight another day. Such love is also fighting itself, for the sake of ensuring that others may live.

It wasn't easy for Joy James to see, dream, and then speak of this function radiating in her mind's eye. But she spit it forth; and we are all the richer for it. May it be so.

#### Notes to Afterword

- 1 See Helen Leichner, “Combahee River Raid (June 2, 1863),” *BlackPast*, December 21, 2012, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-raid-june-2-1863/>.