In a pandemic, we are literally in daily battles for our survival. This limits our capacity to acknowledge and challenge both the many policies and institutions that are designed to harm us, and the ways these harms show up in us—as individuals and communities.

The Chicago Torture Justice Center envisions thriving communities free from racialized state violence. Rooted in the wisdoms of healing and transformative accountability, we cultivate new possibilities for collective well-being and liberation.
OPPRESSION AND TRAUMA

Resilient Strategies recently offered this definition of oppression:

Oppression is how society organizes itself to control the distribution of trauma.

We can't talk about how trauma is distributed without also talking about whose trauma gets recognized and in turn addressed. More often in communities of color, we see how trauma is distributed, erased, or dismissed.

This moment in time is a clear illustration of this truth when we are confronted with the data: in Chicago, African Americans make up 72% of deaths due to COVID-19, but only 30% of the total population.

Health is inherently political.

A pandemic highlights this in new ways, and we must ask:

• Who or what does it serve when we are unwell?
• What becomes possible for ourselves and our communities when we are well?
• What makes us well, and who has access to those tools?

The answers to many of these questions lie in who is making decisions that create or limit access to necessary resources. Policymakers must acknowledge the disproportionate harm their decisions create in communities of color. They must own up to how they have or have not used their power to add to or sustain harm. They must be accountable for the real consequences and the lived trauma their votes create.

EVERY policy decision made at any level that restricts or removes access to resources in communities, especially communities of color, is an act of violence.

When officials limit access to public education, health care, mental health care, transportation, and food through acts of targeted abandonment, they are creating trauma with emotional and physical impacts. In Chicago, disparities in life expectancy by neighborhood are well-researched, but our systems have failed to act.

The current pandemic highlights a public health system that has been decimated through decades of intentional policy decisions that have chosen to prioritize profits and policing over human needs.

Here is how the City of Chicago spends funds in a single day in 2020:

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH:
$608,051 A DAY

POLICE DEPARTMENT:
$4,871,239 A DAY

These disparities are historic. They are built into a racialized capitalist system and a history of slavery in this country. Community wellness requires making decisions that meet immediate needs and taking what James Baldwin called “a long look backwards.”

Data: City of Chicago 2020 Budget Ordinance - Appropriations data.cityofchicago.org
Coronavirus Through Our Politicized Healing Lens

Politicized healing is the belief that our healing is political and our politics can be healing. Politicized healing addresses and seeks to transform the harm—felt by individuals and communities—caused by historic and evolving systems of oppression.

Through the practice of politicized healing, we work to:

**HEAL**
Engage in a self-determined process of restoring ourselves and connecting to others and what we care about

**DISMANTLE**
Unapologetically expose and deconstruct systems of harm

**CREATE**
Build reparative power that realizes new paradigms that we collectively imagine for our communities

This moment has interrupted our ways of being, clearing the way for us to imagine how we might rebuild. We may feel overwhelmed by how quickly things have changed, and we can also utilize this as an entry point. We can recognize all that has led to this moment, and step into it to ask: What needs to be healed? Dismantled? Created?

**HEAL**
Race-based violence, murders committed by the police, and removal of public resources create trauma not only in individuals, but in whole communities. Healing is necessary to make way for new possibilities, and it takes shape differently for everyone. It can look like:

- Connection to ourselves, to others, to what we care about, and to practices that help us feel good
- Mutual support
- Engaging with or expressing what we imagine for ourselves and our communities
- Identifying our feelings, including rage and anger
- Caring for our bodies
- Processing our grief
- Naming the systems that prevent our collective safety—in this moment and always

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DISMANTLE

The current pandemic has clarified and given new urgency to the need to transform our systems that serve the few at the expense of the many. It brings into sharp focus the systems that have long failed us: privatized healthcare, insufficient labor protections, mass confinement in prisons and detention, and an exploitative, racialized economy.

- Take time to reflect on our list of systems we must dismantle above. What are we missing?
- Read up on organizations and individuals who are doing the work right now to confront systemic oppression. If they are seeking support, think about how you can best respond to calls for action.
- Think about what safety means to you and how we can collectively get there. Write it down, talk to someone about it, or use it to inspire a piece of art you make.

CREATE

Just as the last few months have shown us how systems fail, we have also seen the power communities have to create what they need. It has looked like visionary mutual aid networks popping up all over the world, like neighbors stepping in to care for one another to support workers, to feed strangers they will never meet. In this time of great uncertainty, it has been communities that have made sure they have what they need.

In our vision of the world we are working to create, we all have access to what we need not just to survive—but to flourish.

We invite you to hold and reflect on these questions with us as we imagine what we can build together:

- How can we move into the current moment to grow new systems and practices that are not rooted in hoarding wealth or prioritizing profit over living beings, including our planet?
- How do we create new systems and practices that ARE rooted in equitably sharing wealth and resources and in prioritizing the health and wellness of the whole planet?
- How can we lift up the voices of those already offering leadership and doing this work?

Now is the time to access the wisdom that has been handed down for generations in our communities. Now is the time to create the world our ancestors fought for and our children will need. This is the moment we honor and grow through our grief, anger and fear in a collective struggle. As we prepare for a “re-opened” Chicago, we must ensure that means vibrant, healthy, resourced communities across the whole city.

All photos: Sarah-Ji, Love and Struggle Photos