

OP-ED | CULTURE & MEDIA

# From Palestine to US Prisons, Radical Love Can Guide Our Fight for Liberation

The Palestinian Feminist Collective is working to decolonize Valentine's Day this year. Here's how.

By Amira Jarmakani, Nadine Naber, Monica Ramsy, TRUTHOUT  
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AYO WALKER / TRUTHOUT

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**W**hat will your conversation heart say this Valentine's Day?

Will it replicate the possessive politics of modern heteronormative love — summed up by phrases like “be mine” — or will it communicate the idea that love is always political, and that the greatest act of love is to work toward collective liberation?

Cornel West famously said that “justice is what love looks like in public,” yet most public versions of Valentine's Day eschew this collectivist, politicized understanding, instead constructing love as a supremely individualistic and capitalist enterprise. That red, white and pink aisle full of heart-shaped products at the local retail store is brought to you by a process of commercialization that started in the late 1700s, when printed cards began to be circulated. The tradition that would eventually lead to purchasing cards was accelerated in the 19th century thanks to industrialization and the rise of the printing press, and catapulted into a festival of mass consumerism in the 20th century, thanks to Hallmark. Since inaugurating the Valentine's Day card commercial tradition in 1916, the company still benefits handsomely from its share of the roughly 145 million Valentine's cards sold each year. In fact, Valentine's Day displays crowd out (Gregorian) Christmas displays practically before the new year has even begun, not only because of timing — the holiday is also the second-most lucrative, just behind Christmas, in U.S. greeting cards sales.

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## **I'm Craving the Sweetness of Ancestral Love on Valentine's Day**

Contrary to popular belief, most histories of Valentine's Day trace the holiday much further back than St. Valentine himself, noting that it seems to be based on an ancient Roman festival traditionally held in mid-February: Lupercalia, a celebration of health and fertility. The moniker of "Valentine's Day" was later imposed by the Roman Catholic church as a way of appropriating what was seen as a "pagan ritual" that publicly and brazenly celebrated fertility. This rebranding of a "pagan" ritual that still held meaning and value for people represents a form of cultural colonization, ultimately taming and restraining the ritual within Catholic systems of meaning.

**This February, we are co-organizing a monthlong series of discussions and art-making activities with the aim of troubling the militarism and consumerism inherent in Valentine's Day. What we are calling radical love.**

And who is this St. Valentine? In popular stories about the origins of the holiday, St. Valentine is widely identified as a martyr for love. Though there is debate about which St. Valentine is the one for whom the holiday is named, one popular legend is that the

Valentine's Day we widely celebrate is named for a St. Valentine who was executed by Roman Emperor Claudius II for secretly marrying couples — a practice that ran afoul of the emperor's ban on marriage since, he claimed, it would dampen soldiers' zeal for fighting. Some sources even claim love as a constant thread running through military history.

To be sure, Valentine's Day can be a time to cherish our individual loving relationships. Yet we do not have to perpetuate its colonialist, military and corporate roots — roots that have actively hindered, constrained and attached oppressive strings to the potential for love and joy for so many Indigenous, Black, and other people of color, as well as women, queer and trans folks, and disabled and working-class people.

This February, as part of the Palestinian Feminist Collective's 2023 "Feminist Futures" Calendar & Program, we are co-organizing a monthlong series of discussions and art-making activities with the aim of troubling the militarism and consumerism inherent in Valentine's Day. Through this monthlong programming, we hope to build a deeper grounding in what we are calling radical love. The Palestinian Feminist Collective is an intergenerational collective of Arab and Palestinian women and feminists seeking to achieve Palestinian social and political liberation by confronting systemic gendered, sexual and colonial violence, oppression and dispossession.

**Palestinian Feminist Collective**@PalFeminist · [Follow](#)

JOIN US: This February, the PFC is reaffirming its commitment to Radical Love. We uphold radical love as an act of liberation that grounds our resistance. It is both a militant defiance to colonial violence & a life-affirming revolutionary practice of building feminist futures.

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True to our belief that radical love is collaborative, we are developing this work in coalition with members of organizations like Mamas Activating Movements for Abolition and Solidarity (MAMAS), the U.S. Palestinian Community Network (USPCN) and the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition. Our aim is to intentionally integrate

and affirm how radical love can expand the liberatory possibilities of our social movement ecosystems, especially those committed to dismantling prisons and policing, and freeing Palestine.

To us, this means cultivating interdependence and growing practices of collective care and mutual aid while working to create conditions where compassion, love and connection can be enjoyed not only within individual, heteronormative relationships, but also between every member of our communities.

MAMAS, for example, is employing mutual aid as a strategy for expanding the capacity of incarcerated people and their loved ones to not only survive but thrive — to grow their communities and enjoy loving relationships with each other, despite the state's attempts to separate mothers and caregivers from their incarcerated children. The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, meanwhile, is actively imagining liberatory futures free of policing by centering and tending to people's needs in the face of the surveillance state. This work includes creating popular education tools about the harms of policing, skill-building with 4th through 6th graders to foster their collective power, and partnering with the Los Angeles Community Action Network to provide and grow food with and for Skid Row residents; all these activities center the people's own analysis of what resources they need to enjoy freedom and love.

**Let us uplift the idea that love is the collective practice of imagining a future without settler-colonial nation-states, prisons and policing.**

Our Valentine's Day agenda grounds in the belief that our movement work toward liberation from all forms of oppression is itself a labor of love. Drawing from Leah

Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, this belief reminds us that “when we reach for each other and make the most access possible, it is a radical act of love.” This belief also draws from Walidah Imarisha’s work on visionary fiction to assert that radical love is an important tool in the “decolonization of the imagination,” because “it is only through imagining the so-called impossible that we can begin to concretely build it.” In this sense, as we build our practices of radical love, we build and strengthen the decolonial, accessible-for-all world imagination that this love requires.

The less-often quoted part of Cornel West’s invitation to practicing justice as public love is the assertion that “tenderness is what love feels like in private.” Beyond expressing love through a one-day affair of gifts of flowers and chocolate, we affirm that tenderness in intimate relationships, the daily commitment to caring for one another’s basic needs and meeting these needs with vulnerability and compassion, is an integral part of love and political struggle. Though West is so often quoted, his ideas about the need for an ethic of love are no doubt inspired by his collaboration with bell hooks, who said that “without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination.”

Indeed, acts of radical vulnerability, care-work and restorative accountability in the face of intimate and community harms are integral to radical love. We reject the privileging of “public over private,” of “reason over emotion” and of “mind over matter” that pervades our cisheteronormative social institutions, and work instead to center acts of care and mutual aid –writing letters to incarcerated communities, uplifting Trans Day of Remembrance, and supporting mothers’ and community members’ health needs — as inspiration for our understanding of radical love as liberation.

As members of the Palestinian Feminist Collective, we are Palestinian, Arab and North African feminists living in a U.S. that backs the Israeli colonization of Palestine, that leads militaristic warmongering that continues to target our people, from Iraq to Egypt, Syria to Morocco, Yemen to Sudan. It is these experiences of continual besiege that



especially drive our commitments to revolutionary love. For example, we understand survival in the face of airstrikes in Gaza, stun grenades, tear gas, skunk water, rubber bullets and the desecration of Palestinian sacred sites in Jerusalem in May 2021 to be an act of love. Supporting one another in collective mourning and grief for the more than 30 Palestinians killed in 2023 so far is also an act of love. We extend this grief and mourning to join in collective rage against the police-perpetrated killings of Keenan Anderson, Tyre Nichols, and thousands more each year.

In the loudest possible terms, we also uplift queer love as integral to Palestinian liberation. We affirm queer Palestinians as radical agents of transformation in the struggle for a free Palestine, just as we reject Israeli settler-colonialist “pinkwashing,” which refers to the appropriation of the rhetoric of LGBTQ rights to sanitize its public image as the “only gay-friendly country in the Middle East.” This pinkwashing not only erases the daily horrors queer and trans Palestinians suffer under Zionist occupation and plays to racialized stereotypes that essentialize notions of Arab “backwardness;” it also directs international attention away from the oppression of Palestinians and seeks to justify the brutalities of colonization by hiding behind a banner of being queer-friendly.

We believe that caring, nurturing and resisting are inseparable and are essential to joy, well-being and rest, especially for colonized people and people of color. By organizing through radical love, we expand who is included in movement work. When radical love becomes our guiding principle, movement work makes space for grassroots strategies of community care — i.e., aunties caring for niblings; elders sharing movement stories, both triumphant and disappointing; parents prioritizing self-care in order to continue the struggle; and trusting in youth to co-create political education — rather than exclusively highlighting typical political actors.

This Valentine’s Day, let us grow the possibilities for practicing radical love and care together. Let us uplift the idea that love is the collective practice of imagining a future without settler-colonial nation-states, prisons and policing, and working toward this future by creating the conditions for and infrastructures of care.



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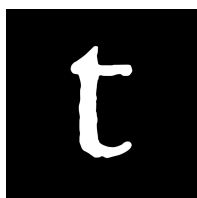
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### AMIRA JARMAKANI

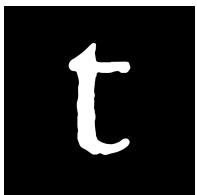
Amira Jarmakani, she/they, is professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and affiliated faculty with the Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies at San Diego State University. Her most recent book, *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror* (NYU Press 2015), explores the crucial role of desire in understanding how the war on terror works and how it perseveres. She also authored *Imagining Arab Womanhood:*

*The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (Palgrave Macmillan 2008), which won the National Women's Studies Association Gloria E. Anzaldúa book prize. She is co-editor, with Pauline Homsy Vinson and Louise Cainkar, of *Sajjilu Arab American: A Reader in SWANA Studies* (Syracuse University Press, 2022) and a series advisor for the Critical Arab American Studies Series with Syracuse University Press. She has served as president of the Arab American Studies Association (2018-2022), board member for the Association of Middle East Women's Studies (2017-2019) and assistant editor for the Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures (2011-2013). She is an organizer/member with the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and the Palestinian Feminist Collective.



## NADINE NABER

Nadine Naber is professor of gender and women's studies and global Asian studies, and interim director of the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is the author and/or co-editor of five books, including *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (NYU Press, 2012) and *Color of Violence* (Duke University Press, 2016). She is a TEDx speaker, board member of the Arab American Action Network, co-founder of Mamas Activating Movements for Abolition and Solidarity, founder of Liberate Your Research, founder of the Arab American Cultural Center, and co-founder of the Arab and Muslim American Studies Program (University of Michigan). Nadine is a Public Voices fellow and columnist for the Chicago Reporter.



## MONICA RAMSY

**Monica Ramsy** (she/they) is a sociology Ph.D. student at the University of California, Los Angeles and Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Research Scholar. Her research interests focus on the sociology of law, gender and carcerality. Through qualitative research methods, she seeks to examine how the implementation of U.S. restorative and transformative justice practices — especially in response to gender-based violence — intersect with race, gender and disability. Prior to matriculating to UCLA, Monica received their J.D. from the University of California,

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