Quaker Witnessing During Philadelphia's MOVE Crisis
Moving Towards Risky Solidarity[1]

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Introduction

On May 13th, 1985, the City of Philadelphia bombed its own residents. Eyewitnesses watched as the Philadelphia police dropped a two-pound C4 bomb from a helicopter onto the home of MOVE, a Black liberation and back-to-nature organization[4]. The bomb shattered the windows of nearby cars and buildings, shook the ground for miles, and ignited a fire that engulfed the MOVE rowhome.[5] As the fire grew hot enough to melt steel, leaping across houses and streets, police commissioner Gregor Sambor instructed firefighters to "let the fire burn."[6] As MOVE members and their children attempted to flee the burning building, they were shot at by police until they retreated.[7] In the end, the city of Philadelphia killed 11 Black people, including five children. Sixty-one homes were destroyed, over 200 people were left homeless, and an entire block of one of Philadelphia's historically Black neighborhoods was left in ruins.

The MOVE massacre was the culmination of rising tensions between the city and MOVE, a conflict that Friends had tried to de-escalate since the 1970s by appealing to Quaker ideas of non-violence. In this piece, we explore two historical moments in which Quakers aimed to show solidarity with Black liberation: the 1969 Black Manifesto and the 1978 Friendly Presence Vigil. Our work is grounded in research at the Swarthmore College Special Collections, where we uncovered, analyzed, and pieced together insights from MOVE's history through the records of the Society of Friends. A critical evaluation of these records shows that Quakers' understanding

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[4] For a fuller characterization of MOVE, see *On a MOVE* by Mike Africa Jr., 2024.
[5] Africa Jr. 2024, 135
[6] *Let the Fire Burn,* Jason Osder, 2013
[7] Africa Jr. 2024, 136

of non-violence unintentionally helped perpetuate anti-blackness, the social structure that makes violence against Black people into a norm.

While at the forefront of their era in recognizing MOVE and working to prevent harm coming to them, the tension between Quaker commitment to nonviolence and the necessity for direct action revealed a paradox in their approach; it led to a kind of solidarity that, while well-intentioned, fell short of achieving the kind of social transformation needed to uplift Black people.

Moving towards a "risky solidarity" framework, we bring to light the complex relationships between Philadelphia Quakers and Black organizations they aimed to support, explore how discussions of nonviolence often perpetuate anti-blackness, and connect these historical moments to ongoing dialogue around reparations in the city of Philadelphia today.

Calling for Risky Solidarity

Notably, the limits and apprehensions surrounding racial solidarity weren't unique to Friends' interactions with MOVE's nonviolent resistance. In 1969, the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC), a national organization aimed at addressing economic disparities in Black communities issued the 'Black Manifesto' at a Detroit conference. The manifesto demanded $500 million in reparations from predominantly white religious organizations to address the legacy of slavery and the exploitation of enslaved Black individuals. This bold demand aimed to address racial inequities and financially empower Black communities. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's (PYM) response to these demands revealed deep divisions among Quakers. Some Friends recognized the critical need for reparations as a means to right historical wrongs, calling it a necessary "wake up call". Others were unsettled by what they perceived as the demands' coercive and confrontational tone, calling the manifesto "violent" and "an unacceptable ultimatum."[8] This split revealed an internal struggle within the PYM Quaker community to confront and address the deep-seated racism highlighted by the Manifesto. Quakers used the idea of nonviolence to differentiate between groups that were worthy of Quaker funding, and those that were not. Conveniently, this discourse characterized the BEDC as violent, and therefore, unworthy of material support.

Quakers failed to translate their theoretical support for racial solidarity into the material practice of reparations requested by the BEDC. After a year of discussion, the PYM did not reach a consensus, leaving individual Friends to make their own reparations–or more often, not.

We understand this history as a moment of what Juliet Hooker has conceptualized as "racialized solidarity". In her book, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, she argues solidarity is more often mobilized within racial groups, rather than across them. If solidarity is about "who is

[8] Miscellaneous records, 1969-1970, RG2/Phy/085. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Meeting for Sufferings (1756-1910), Representative Committee (1828-1995), Interim Meeting (1996-2014), and Continuing Sessions (2015-), QM-Phy-040. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

seen as entitled to mutual respect and about who is conceived as being able to make claims on our sympathies,"[9] then white activists frequently fail to form relationships of mutual trust, respect, and empathy with Black liberation organizations.

Solidarity, in its most impactful form, requires taking risks. In a letter from Larry Miller to Ross Flanagan, one Friend framed the debate over reparations as "whether or not we are willing to risk a loss of our material security in order to respond to the demands of justice."[10] In this article, we expand on Hooker's theory to argue that "risky solidarity" requires being willing to risk the level of security that privilege carries in order to actively participate in the dismantling of systems that perpetuate suffering.

As we elaborate next, Quakers in Philadelphia struggled to enact riskier modes of solidarity when it came to the MOVE crisis.

Friendly Presence Vigil

In 1978, MOVE operated out of a house in Powelton Village, West Philadelphia. Approximately 15-20 members of MOVE lived there, growing food, composting, and raising animals in the backyard. Materials from the Swarthmore Special Collections document long-standing conflicts between MOVE and their neighbors, who complained -often rightfully- about the twenty stray dogs housed by MOVE, the smell of feces, and compost and debris in their backyard[11]. Yet, MOVE responded by encouraging residents to direct their concerns towards the "real pollution" from "cars, insecticides, [and] food additives."[12] MOVE's practices were disruptive to their neighbors[13], and intentionally so: MOVE understood the disruption of societal norms as key to the destruction of oppressive systems.

City reactions to MOVE occurred within the context of the redevelopment of West Philadelphia. Powelton was marked as a key location for the expansion of Drexel University property, at the expense of low-income Black families. When neighbors complained about MOVE, or when the city cited MOVE for various housing violations, these disputes took place in the context of what we might describe today as gentrification efforts. The city's selective enforcement of housing violations meant that Black residents were expected to adopt white, middle-class values and norms, or else leave Powelton.[14] As the city, West Philadelphia

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[9] Hooker 2009, 26

[10] Correspondence, 1969, RG2/Phy/085. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Meeting for Sufferings (1756-1910), Representative Committee (1828-1995), Interim Meeting (1996-2014), and Continuing Sessions (2015-), QM-Phy-040. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

[11] Tajah Ebram, "'Can't Jail the Revolution: Policing, Protest, and the MOVE Organization in Philadelphia's Carceral Landscape," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 143:3, 2019, 350

[12] Ebram 2019, 350

[13] Kamari Maxine Clarke, "The Geopolitics of Black Bones that Matter," *American Anthropologist* 2022

[14] Ebram 2019, 350-352

developers, and their neighborhood allies increasingly portrayed MOVE as a danger to health and safety, they fueled the idea that MOVE needed to be removed, by any means necessary.

As the starvation blockade continued, the Society of Friends, specifically the Friendly Presence Working Group of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, initiated a vigil. For 24 hours a day, for 27 days, they stood in silent prayer on the corner of Race and 33rd streets, the edge of the blockade. The banner behind them read "an appeal to the people of Philadelphia."[15] The flyers they handed out said "don't kill them, don't starve them, keep working on it."[16] The Friends saw themselves as "bearing witness", which they understood as part of Quaker testimony, or the lived practice of a commitment to love, truth, and peace.

However, similar to the Friends' response to the BEDC, Quaker solidarity efforts once again failed to challenge racial power dynamics. Documents in the archives show the emergence of a specific type of discourse on nonviolence among white Quakers in 1970s and 80s Philadelphia. This discourse was characterized by Quakers equating nonviolence with "neutrality"; Quakers failing to name and address the power imbalance between MOVE and the police; and their resulting passivity during instances of police violence.

In the context of the Friendly Presence Working Group, the Friends equated nonviolence with third-party neutrality. In a document titled *Suggestions for Maintaining the Vigil*, the Friendly Presence says they are holding the vigil "not as automatic partisans of one side against others, but to a way out of the predicament of which we are a part."[17] In a retrospective memo on the vigil, one of the coordinators, Charles Walker, saw the purpose of the vigil as "peacekeeping", and identified it as "by nature a third-party or nth-party function."[18]

Unfortunately, Friends' desire to be "neutral" minimized police violence during the blockade. In a meeting between Friends and Powelton neighbors, resident Jean Byall advocated for the starvation blockade on the grounds that it was "nonviolent", saying that the police were "forcing MOVE to come out without bloodshed. They do not have to stay in there and starve."[19]

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[15] George and Lillian: MOVE -- Friendly Presence vigil, Spring 1978, Box: 30 [SCPC-6666]. George Willoughby and Lillian Willoughby Papers, SCPC-DG-236. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.
[16] Friendly Presence Printed Documents Pertaining to Vigil, 1978, Box 91a. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Friends Peace Committee and its predecessors (1891-2015), QM-Phy-770. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.
[17] Friendly Presence Vigil Memos, Info Sheets, and Lists, 1978, Box 91a. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Friends Peace Committee and its predecessors (1891-2015), QM-Phy-770. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.
[18] George and Lillian: MOVE -- Friendly Presence vigil, Spring 1978, Box: 30 [SCPC-6666]. George Willoughby and Lillian Willoughby Papers, SCPC-DG-236. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.
[19] Friendly Presence Miscellaneous MOVE Vigil Documents, 1978, Box 91a. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Friends Peace Committee and its predecessors (1891-2015), QM-Phy-770. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

By calling the blockade nonviolent, Byall ignored and silenced what would happen if MOVE did leave: arrests, imprisonment, separation from their children, and the destruction of their home.

Many vigilers saw their role as being in conversation with the police, rather than protesting them. In his final report on the vigil, Robert Tatman describes "a feeling of amity" between Quakers and police that allowed for "very frank and open discussions on force, nonviolence, and other highly relevant topics."[20] In the handwritten log of the vigil, one participant writes:

"I am becoming less pro-MOVE and more objective. I feel good talking to police as people…I'm usually down on cops but I've had time here to observe all of the people run the stop signs and be generally inconsiderate not only to the police but other human beings too. It's sad from all angles."

The entry immediately following reads:

"We could see in the distance the demonstration by the Coalition of Black Leaders…they tried to bring food in to MOVE but +/- 15 people were arrested. Then police w/ horses dispersed the onlookers because the crowd felt positive towards the demonstrators."[21]

These log entries show one vigil participant equating an objective, neutral stance in the conflict with a more sympathetic attitude towards police. Then, when the participant witnesses police take action against demonstrators, and then against onlookers, they fail to name the injustice of forcibly dispersing peaceful bystanders. The vigil participant, in theory, has a common position and goal with the onlookers; yet, they give their sympathy most freely to the police.

These entries are not unusual within the log; there are many accounts of friendly relations between Quakers and police, quickly followed by a description of police action against other groups, particularly those led by Black folk. Onlookers were forcibly dispersed, on horseback, simply for cheering on the Citywide Black Coalition (a Philadelphia-based organization that advocated for human rights and against police brutality). We were reminded of our own experience at a recent protest in Philadelphia, when police on bicycles began to enclose us, pressing closer and closer until we dispersed. The vigil log fails to capture the panic and terror of such a moment precisely because the Friends felt safely outside the target of police repression.

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[20] Robert Tatman's "Final Report", 1978, Box 91a. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Friends Peace Committee and its predecessors (1891-2015), QM-Phy-770. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

[21] Vigil Log and Attachments, 1978, Box 91a. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Friends Peace Committee and its predecessors (1891-2015), QM-Phy-770. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

Missing here is how Quakers' friendly feelings towards police during the vigil were possible as a function of whiteness. Neutrality relies on the white privilege of watching another group experience violence, and having the choice to remain a mere bystander because the violence is not being directed at you.

In the context of systemic violence, Friends' self-identification as both nonviolent and neutral posed a paradox. Every aspect of the conflict between MOVE and the city was embedded in anti-blackness — a social structure that disregards the value of Black life.

MOVE was a neighborhood nuisance, the owners of a home flagged by city administrators for various code violations. At the same time, they were a political organization using disruptive tactics to oppose "the system", which was the concept they used to refer to what we increasingly conceptualize in the U.S. as white supremacy. In turn, the city's actions were fueled by the racist rhetoric of the War on Crime. On a material level, the city's military-grade response against MOVE was possible because of partnerships between the Philadelphia police and the U.S. military that used increasingly deadly tactics against Black people.[22] The city had a monopoly on violence, which it deployed with overwhelming force against MOVE.

Because Friendly Presence did not name the racial dimensions of the blockade, they quietly normalized the power and violence of racism. They portrayed the vigil as a multiracial coalition, another nod to neutrality.

We can contrast Friends' narratives with the Citywide Black Community Coalition, who framed the conflict between MOVE and the city as "part of a continuing history of the flagrant disregard for the human rights of Blacks at home and abroad for over 500 years."[23] Unfortunately, Friends did not incorporate an analysis of race into their interpretation of the blockade, which limited their understanding of power dynamics between the police and MOVE. Simplifying MOVE and the police as two parties in disagreement and failing to evaluate their power imbalance meant preserving a false peace, empty and without real justice.

In the 1970s and 80s, Quaker discourse on nonviolence was characterized by the limits of empathy, the desire to remain neutral in the face of injustice, and its blindness to white supremacy. Accurately apprehending the violence of systemic racism is no small task–yet, what the MOVE crisis called for from Quakers was a bolder, riskier solidarity—one that required them to confront and risk their white privilege, standing alongside MOVE with a strong moral stance.

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[22] Ebram 2019, 359

[23] Friendly Presence Printed Documents Pertaining to Vigil, 1978, Box 91a. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Friends Peace Committee and its predecessors (1891-2015), QM-Phy-770. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

A lived commitment to peace in the world–the heart of Quaker values–may require a loss of material comfort and security. We ask now, as MOVE asked then: are Friends prepared to take this ethical leap?

Land as Reparations

Our discussion on solidarity extends to the ongoing struggle faced by MOVE survivors, particularly in their efforts to reclaim land as a form of reparations—a term we intentionally use to frame this vision of justice for MOVE that demands material redress. The relentless attempts to displace MOVE from their home in Powelton Village were driven by a belief that their presence caused property values to plummet, fueling broader gentrification efforts. MOVE's steadfast resilience against these powerful forces showed their commitment to advocating for marginalized voices and asserting their right to remain in their community.

Their struggle brings into focus the role of those who aimed to support MOVE. The Quakers, known for their commitment to peace and social justice, attempted to address the conflicts surrounding MOVE through their principle of "bearing witness." However, their approach during the MOVE crisis often fell short of the risky solidarity the situation called for. The case of a New Jersey Quaker farmer who supposedly offered land to MOVE illustrates this gap. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) reported on this situation in 1978, suggesting that the offer was intended to ease tensions by relocating MOVE. Despite this, the AFSC Quakers later acknowledged their failure to verify the story's origin, stating, "to this day we don't know how that story began."[24]

In May 2024, the MOVE Activist Archive opened its first-ever pop-up exhibit at the Paul Robeson House in West Philadelphia. During our visit, Mike Africa Jr., a MOVE member and son of MOVE leaders, revealed a side of MOVE's history that is often overshadowed by the violence they endured – their economic resilience. MOVE was building a foundation of economic autonomy. Mike shared that MOVE owned property stretching beyond Philadelphia to New Jersey, New York, Virginia, and other locations, and they operated a successful car wash business. However, the government systematically targeted and shut down their business, striking at the heart of their economic independence. Listening to Mike, it became clear that MOVE's struggle was also about securing the right to build and sustain their own community.

MOVE, however, denied the AFSC's narrative, asserting that they were never offered land and dismissing the story as one of "the many lies that the Mayor Frank Rizzo administration

[24] Friendly Presence Printed Documents Pertaining to Vigil, 1978, Box 91a. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Friends Peace Committee and its predecessors (1891-2015), QM-Phy-770. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

is telling on the MOVE ORGANIZATION."[25] These conflicting narratives from MOVE, the Quakers, and local government officials aren't just differing perspectives, they expose who gets to control the narrative, and ultimately, who has the power to define justice. Each account brings its own perspective, casting the true record of events as fractured and ambiguous. When MOVE denied the AFSC's narrative, they were potentially rejecting a system that silenced their voice and ignored their calls for genuine recognition and justice.

Reparations, therefore, aren't just about material compensation; they're about acknowledging the complexity of historical truth and confronting systems that allow injustice to continue.

Today, MOVE members, alongside Philadelphia activists, continue to demand the restitution of their house on Osage Ave, the freeing of political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, and the full return of the remains of the Africa children by Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania. Their demands stress this need for tangible gestures of material and social repair.

Crucially, framing this in terms of reparations invites us to further reflect on what genuine, actionable support for MOVE could have looked like. For MOVE, risky solidarity would have required more than the witnessing as practiced by the Society of Friends, it would have called for active and engaged efforts through reparations. This idea of reparations as a means of healing, mirrors what author and activist, Ta-Nehisi Coates explores in his influential essay, "The Case for Reparations." Here, Coates challenges us to think beyond financial compensation, urging for something much deeper — a "healing of the American psyche" and a "banishment of white guilt."[26] His vision of reparations acknowledges the full scope of harm inflicted on Black communities like MOVE, addressing not just material losses but the deeper, systemic wounds caused by anti-blackness. He reminds us that reparations must pave the way for rebuilding — whether that's a home, a community, or a sense of belonging that was stripped away. For MOVE and countless other Black communities, reparations mean reclaiming a future that has been denied for too long. Only through this process can we begin to truly move toward true justice.

Conclusion

In the 1970s the Black Manifesto called upon white institutions to consider what they owe black folk and to pay it back; it remains relevant as ever. In Philadelphia, the city's Reparations Task Force aims to "report on how reparations can atone for the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and institutional racism in America for Black Philadelphians." In doing this work, the city also has the historic opportunity to acknowledge, confront, and repair the losses inflicted

[25] Robert Tatman's "Final Report", 1978, Box 91a. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records: Friends Peace Committee and its predecessors (1891-2015), QM-Phy-770. Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.
[26] Ta-Nehisi Coates. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic,* October 2, 2014.

upon MOVE. Offering reparations to Black Philadelphia means offering reparations to MOVE. Honoring MOVE's needs is one step towards addressing the broader, ongoing struggles faced by the Black community.

In this context, Quakers, too, are faced with the ethical imperative to reflect on their role in anti-Blackness, and direct their energy and resources towards reparations in the present. For over 55 years, Friends failed to collectively respond to the call for reparations issued by the BEDC. In an issue that asks "how should meetings use their money?", we answer: reparations, now. A living testimony of Quaker values could involve directly donating to MOVE's efforts to reclaim their home on Osage Ave. Meetings could look into their property holdings, and investigate land that could be, or should be returned. Meetings could follow the example of Green Street Meeting, which has pledged $500,000 towards reparations, primarily focused on helping their Black neighbors keep their homes in the face of gentrification.

We need a Quaker practice of nonviolence that actively creates peace and justice within the world, and we can only do so by confronting anti-Blackness. History provides examples of what not to do: the ways Quakers failed to show solidarity with MOVE and the Black Economic Development Conference, the ways that Friends' white privilege was mobilized in detriment of Philadelphia's Black community. Repair is necessary, and possible; reparations offer a meaningful, material place to begin.