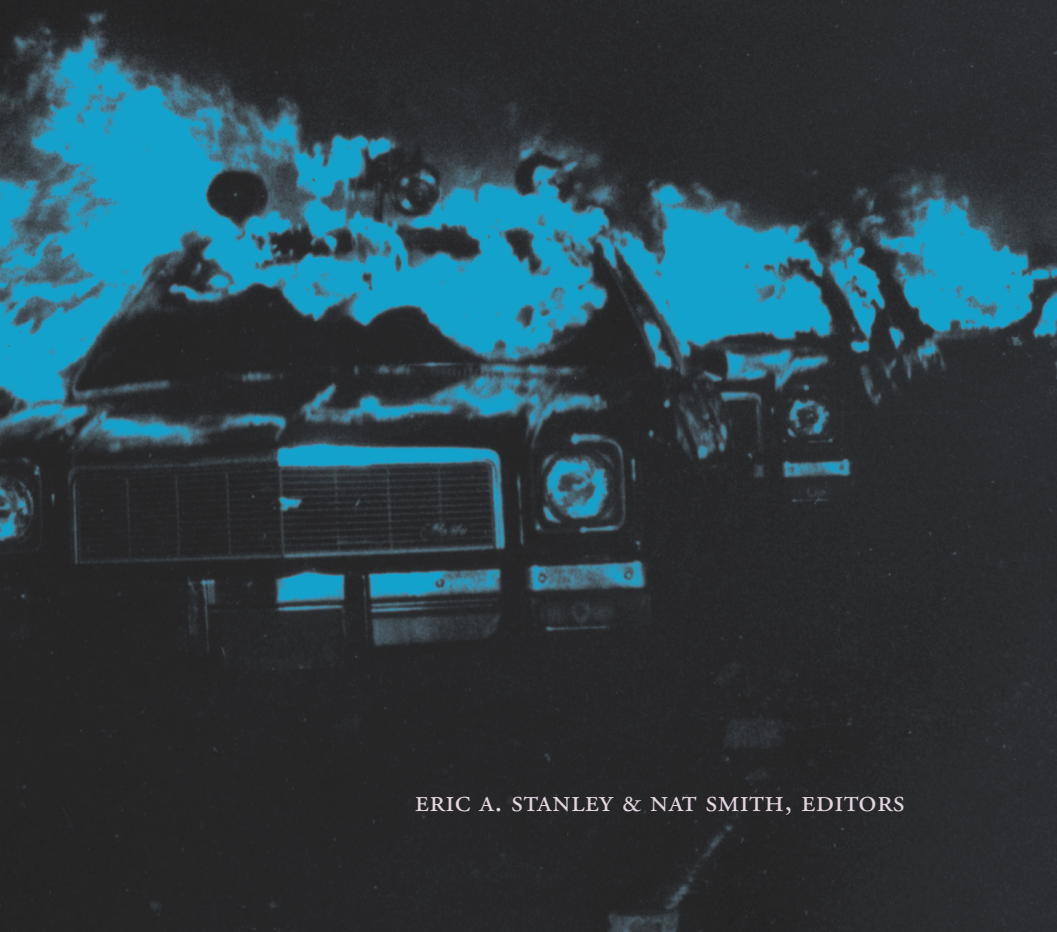


CAPTIVE GENDERS

TRANS EMBODIMENT AND THE
PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX



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TRANSFORMING CARCERAL LOGICS:

10 Reasons to Dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex Through Queer/Trans Analysis and Action

S. Lamble

It's hard for us to believe what we're hearing these days. Thousands are losing their homes, and gays want a day named after Harvey Milk. The US military is continuing its path of destruction, and gays want to be allowed to fight. Cops are still killing unarmed black men and bashing queers, and gays want more policing. More and more Americans are suffering and dying because they can't get decent health care, and gays want weddings. What happened to us?

—Queer Kids of Queer Parents Against Gay Marriage¹

This article arose from an ongoing need to make stronger connections between struggles for gender and sexual justice, and the growing crisis of mass incarceration, over-policing, and cultures of control. Too often, these

issues are considered in isolation from each other. On the one hand, prisoner justice activists have not always paid sufficient attention to the gender and sexual dimensions of prisons,² especially for queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people.³ On the other hand, queer and trans organizers have often excluded prisoners from our communities and not prioritized prisoner justice issues within broader movement struggles. Within anti-violence movement politics, some feminist, queer, and trans activists have also been too quick to equate justice with imprisonment—by embracing hate crimes laws, advocating for longer prison sentences for those who commit sexual violence, and calling for increased “community” policing.⁴

But struggles against abuse, assault, poverty, racism, and social control require clearer connections between the violence of gender/sexual oppression and the violence of the prison system. Indeed, many of us who are involved in anti-violence work through rape crisis centers, homeless shelters, and queer/trans safe spaces are also committed to struggles against imprisonment. For some, our anti-prison politics grew out of that anti-violence work. After years of repeatedly responding to the same forms of violence, and after dealing with the ongoing failures and injustices of the criminal system, it has become clear that prisons not only fail to protect our communities from violence, but actually enable, perpetuate, and foster *more* violence.

Engaging in struggles against imprisonment is particularly urgent now, as the so-called “war on terror” intensifies, as attacks on migrants and people of color increase, as violence against women, queers, and trans people show few signs of abating, and as the global prison population expands dramatically. These trends are closely related to changes in the global political economy; as governments continue to slash welfare, education, housing, and health budgets on the one hand, they increase spending on prisons, police, military, and border controls on the other.

Never before has the prison industrial complex⁵ been so powerful, particularly in the Global North. While the United States takes the global lead in locking up its people (with 1 in every 100 adults currently behind bars and more than 7.3 million people in prison, on probation, or on parole⁶), other countries, such as Britain, Canada, and Australia are rapidly following suit. England and Wales, for example, has nearly doubled its prison population since 1992 and is currently embarking on a £3.2–4.7 billion (\$5–7 billion USD) prison-building spree to create space for more than 10,500 new prisoners by 2014.⁷ Canada has recently passed tougher sentencing laws, and prison expansion proposals are looming.⁸

Examining these overall trends, however, does not provide an accurate picture of who is most affected by the growth in the prison industrial complex. Prison expansion disproportionately targets particular groups of people, especially communities of color, poor and working class people, youth, immigrants, women, people with learning disabilities and mental health issues, as well as queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people, who are increasingly forced into greater cycles of poverty, criminalization, incarceration, and violence.

As the more privileged members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) communities are ushered into new forms of neoliberal citizenship—where buying power, respectability, assimilation, and nationalism are the price of welcome—and as some LGBT groups are developing closer ties with police and military forces through recruitment campaigns, advisory boards, and liaison committees, we need to question who is bearing the costs of so-called “inclusion.” If such inclusion means complicity with the violence and racism of the prison industrial complex, we must rethink those strategies. It is more important than ever to reject strategies that allow queer, trans, and feminist politics to be used for war, imprisonment, state violence, and racism. We must put antiviolence, anti-racism, and anti-prison struggles at the center of queer, trans, and feminist organizing efforts.

This article makes the case for a queer/trans politics of prison abolition. When using the term “queer/trans politics,” I’m referring less to “queer” and “trans” as umbrella identity terms and more to a political approach that questions, disrupts, and transforms dominant ideas about what is normal. Questioning the normalcy of the prison, a queer/trans politics not only helps identify the role of imprisonment in perpetuating gender, racial, and sexual violence, but also provides tools for developing alternative community responses that better address problems of harm. Drawing from my experiences as a non-imprisoned person engaging in prisoner support and activist work in Canada and Britain, I outline ten reasons why we should dismantle the prison industrial complex using a queer/trans analysis. In making these arguments, I hope to highlight relationships between gender, sexuality, policing, and imprisonment and provide some analytic starting points that might prompt further community organizing around these issues.

This article is written with a diverse audience and multiple purposes in mind—it is for queer and trans communities who have not prioritized prison and policing issues; it is for prison activists who have not

considered the gender/sexuality dimensions of the prison industrial complex; it is for folks who recognize that prisons are harmful but are skeptical of abolitionist ideas; it is for communities who are broadly committed to social, economic, and racial justice. Most of all, it is written as a tool for discussion. It is a contribution to ongoing debates about what kind of world we want to live in. For a growing number of people, that world must be one without prisons.

Before setting out the arguments for a queer/trans politics of prison abolition, I want to offer three important caveats:

First, the following arguments are not new, nor is queer and trans prison activism a novel phenomenon. Because prisons, police, immigration officials, and psychiatric institutions have long punished people for transgressing sexual and gender norms, queer and trans people have a long tradition of resistance to institutions of punishment.⁹ Building on previous organizing histories as well as contemporary struggles, this article argues for a renewed queer/trans anti-prison politics.

Second, in writing on prison issues, particularly those of us who have not directly spent time behind bars, it is important not to fetishize or sensationalize the experiences of prisoners. Much of the general public's ideas about prison come from corporate media, which not only provides distorted and misleading information, but usually treats prisoners as objects of fascination, fuel for fear-mongering, or targets of pity.¹⁰ To counter the media's sensationalist pull, it is important to critically reflect on how and why we approach prison issues. For some, we may have been imprisoned ourselves or people we love are imprisoned. For others, we may be tacitly driven by fantasies about saving oppressed "others," desires to claim a place of belonging within "radical" political communities, or a commitment to prison reform. However well-intentioned we might be, it is important to critically challenge our motivations and assumptions, particularly those that perpetuate rather than undo patterns of oppression. More importantly, there remains an ongoing need to prioritize the voices, perspectives, and experiences of prisoners, ex-prisoners, and those most directly affected by criminalization and imprisonment.

Third, although I draw from academic research to support my arguments, I want to emphasize that these studies generally confirm what many prisoners already know from their own experiences of the prison system. The danger of using academic research is that it perpetuates the assumption that prisoners' knowledge is less valid or legitimate than institutional knowledge. As such, I want to emphasize that much

of my own analysis would be impossible without the knowledge, experiences, and analyses that prisoners have shared with me over the years.¹¹

Ten Reasons to Fight the Prison Industrial Complex Using a Queer/Trans Analysis

- 1. Queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people have been historically subject to oppressive laws, gender policing, and criminal punishment—a legacy that continues today despite ongoing legal reforms.**

Law enforcement officials (including police, courts, immigration officers, prison guards, and other state agents) have a long history of targeting, punishing, and criminalizing sexual dissidents and gender-non-conforming people.¹² While many overtly homophobic and transphobic laws have been recently overturned in Canada, the United States, and Britain, the criminalization and punishment of queer and trans people extends well beyond formal legislation.¹³ State officials enable or participate in violence against queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming communities by (a) ignoring everyday violence against queer and trans people; (b) selectively enforcing laws and policies in transphobic and homophobic ways; (c) using discretion to over-police and enact harsher penalties against queer and trans people; and (d) engaging in acts of violence, harassment, sexual assault, and discrimination against queer and trans people.¹⁴ While some police departments are increasingly putting on a “gay-positive” public face, the problem of state violence against queer and trans people nonetheless persists and has been well documented by numerous police- and prison-monitoring groups.¹⁵

This ongoing legacy of violence should make queer and trans people both cautious of the state’s power to criminalize our lives and wary of the state’s claim to protect us from harm. Although some people believe that we can train transphobia out of law enforcement agents or eliminate homophobic discrimination by hiring more LGBT prison guards, police, and immigration officials, such perspectives wrongly assume that discrimination is a “flaw” in the system, rather than intrinsic to the system itself. Efforts to make prison and police institutions more “gay-friendly” perpetuate the myth that such systems are in place to protect us. But as the uneven history of criminalization trends in Canada, the United States, and Britain so clearly demonstrate (that is, the way that the system targets some people and not others), the prison industrial complex is less about protecting the public from violence and more about controlling, labeling, disciplining,

and in some cases killing particular groups of people—especially those who potentially disrupt the social, economic, and political status quo.¹⁶

While the state might stop harassing, assaulting, and criminalizing some people within queer and trans communities (namely those upwardly mobile, racially privileged, and property-owning folks), the criminal system will continue to target those within our communities who are deemed economically unproductive, politically threatening, or socially undesirable. As people who have historically been (and continue to be) targeted by this unjust system, queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming communities must move away from efforts to make the prison industrial complex more “LGBT-friendly” and instead fight the underlying logic of the system itself.

2. Queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people, particularly those from low-income backgrounds and communities of color, are directly targeted by criminalization, punishment, and imprisonment.

We do not know exactly how many queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people are currently incarcerated. This is partly because most governments do not collect information on the sexual and gender identity of prisoners and partly because prisoners are not always safe to disclose their gender or sexual identities. However, we know that queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people in Canada, the United States, and Britain are frequently over-policed, over-criminalized, and over-represented in the prison system.¹⁷ Levels of harassment, targeting, and arrest are high, particularly for young queer and trans people, those from low-income communities, people with learning disabilities and mental health issues, and people of color. Trans community organizers in the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, report that nearly half of the 20,000 transgender people in the region have been in prison or jail.¹⁸

Queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people are funneled into the criminal system for many reasons but primarily due to systemic oppression. Because trans, queer, and gender-variant people experience widespread discrimination, harassment, and violence, we are at greater risk of social and economic marginalization. This translates into higher risks of imprisonment. We know that queer and trans youth, for example, are more likely to be homeless, unemployed, bullied at school, harassed on the street, estranged from family, and targeted by sexual violence—factors that greatly increase the risks of criminalization and imprisonment

especially for queer and trans people of color.¹⁹ Trans people in particular, and those who are visibly gender-non-conforming, are routinely harassed by law enforcement and security officials for undertaking basic daily activities like using the toilet, accessing public services, or walking down the street.²⁰

Groups like FIERCE! have shown how the “school-to-prison-pipeline” disproportionately affects queer and trans youth.²¹ Whether dropping out of school because of severe harassment and discrimination, feeling alienated from education curriculum, experiencing suicidal thoughts, or turning to criminalized coping mechanisms like drug and alcohol use, queer and trans youth often have less chances for success in school.²² “Zero tolerance” policies, heightened surveillance, and increased police presence in schools further contribute to criminalization and dropout rates, particularly for queer and trans youth of color. “Quality of life” ordinances, such as “anti-social behavior orders” and “safe streets acts,” are also routinely used to remove queer and trans youth from public spaces and criminalize their social activities.²³ Coupled with problems at home, many queer and trans youth find themselves homeless and unemployed.²⁴ Once on the street, queer and trans youth have trouble accessing services and supports to get their basic needs met. Many homeless shelters and social services, for example, are not safe places for trans people (sometimes banning trans people outright), and problems with gender categories on identity documents can restrict welfare access.²⁵ Without income, housing, family, or community support, survival often means working in criminalized economies like drug and sex trade.

Queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming youth who are bullied, harassed, and assaulted—particularly those who don’t fit the stereotype of the passive, innocent, white victim—are blamed and punished when they defend themselves. The recent case of the New Jersey 7, in which seven young African American lesbians were criminalized for defending themselves against sexist and homophobic harassment, provides a case in point.²⁶ Given that criminalization and imprisonment both arise from, and further exacerbate, experiences of social marginalization and oppression, efforts to address queer and trans homelessness, unemployment, suicide, school dropout rates, harassment, and abuse cannot stop short of prison issues.

3. Prisons reinforce oppressive gender and sexual norms.

Prisons reinforce gender and sexual norms in three key ways: First, sex-segregated prisons restrict people’s right to determine and express their

own gender identity and sexuality. Because most prisons divide people according to their perceived genitals rather than their self-expressed gender identity, prisoners who don't identify as "male" or "female" or who are gender-non-conforming are often sent to segregation or forced to share a cell with prisoners of a different gender, often with little regard for their safety. In Britain, even trans people who have obtained a Gender Recognition Certificate (a state document that legally recognizes a person's self-defined gender) have been held in prisons with people of a different gender.²⁷ By segregating institutions along sex/gender lines, prisons work to make invisible, isolate, and stigmatize those bodies and gender identity expressions that defy imposed gender binaries.²⁸

Second, gender segregation in prisons plays a key role in "correctional" efforts to modify prisoner behavior in accordance with gender norms. Historically, women's prisons were designed to transform "fallen" women into better wives, mothers, homemakers, and domestic servants, whereas men's prisons were designed to transform males into disciplined individuals, productive workers, and masculine citizens.²⁹ These gendered goals persist today, particularly in the division of prison labor. For example, when a new mixed-gender prison was built in Peterborough, England in 2005, all parts of the institution were duplicated to provide separate male and female areas, except for the single kitchen, where women were expected to do all the cooking.³⁰ The current trend toward so-called "gender responsive" prisons is likewise framed as a measure to address the specific needs of female prisoners, but usually works to discipline, enforce, and regulate gender norms.³¹ Moreover, gender-responsive prison reforms are increasingly used to justify building new prisons (without closing existing ones), thereby furthering prison expansion.³²

Third, sexual violence plays a key role in maintaining order and control within prisons, a tactic that relies on oppressive sexual and gender norms.³³ Sexual violence in prison, including harassment, rape, and assault, is shockingly widespread and often institutionally condoned. According to Stop Prisoner Rape, 1 in 5 males and 1 in 4 females face sexual assault in US prisons.³⁴ To call attention to the enforcement of gender/sexual norms in prison is not to suggest that prison culture is uniform across or within institutions, or that prisoners are more sexist, homophobic, or transphobic than non-prisoners. Rather, prisons as institutions tend to reinforce, perpetuate, and entrench gender/sex hierarchies and create environments in which sexual violence flourishes.

4. Prisons are harmful, violent, and damaging places, especially for queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming folks.

Prisons are violent institutions. People in prison and detention experience brutal human rights abuses, including physical assault, psychological abuse, rape, harassment, and medical neglect. Aside from these violations, the act of putting people in cages is a form of violence in itself. Such violence leads to extremely high rates of self-harm and suicide, both in prison and following release.³⁵ These problems are neither exceptional nor occasional; violence is endemic to prisons.

It is important to bear in mind that prison violence stems largely from the institutional structure of incarceration rather than from something supposedly inherent to prisoners themselves. Against the popular myth that prisons are filled with violent and dangerous people, the vast majority of people are held in prison for non-violent crimes, especially drug offenses and crimes of poverty.³⁶ For the small number of people who pose a genuine risk to themselves or others, prisons often make those risks worse. In other words, prisons are dangerous not because of who is locked inside, but instead prisons both require and foster violence as part of their punitive function. For this reason, reform efforts may reduce, but cannot ultimately eliminate, prison violence.

The high number of deaths in state custody speaks to the devastating consequences of imprisonment. Between 1995 and 2007, the British prison-monitoring group Inquest documented more than 2,500 deaths in police and prison custody.³⁷ Homicide and suicide rates in Canadian prisons are nearly eight times the rate found in non-institutional settings.³⁸ In the United States between 2001 and 2006, there were 18,550 adult deaths in state prisons,³⁹ and between 2003 and 2005, there were an additional 2,002 arrest-related deaths.⁴⁰ It is extremely rare for state officials to be held accountable for these deaths. For example, among the deaths that Inquest has documented in Britain, not one police or prison officer to date has been held criminally responsible.⁴¹

Deaths in custody are symptomatic of the daily violence and harm that prisoners endure. Queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people are subject to these harms in specific ways:

- *High risk of assault and abuse:* Queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people are subject to widespread sexual assault, abuse, and other gross human rights violations, not only from other prisoners, but from prison staff as well.⁴²

- *Denial of healthcare:* Many prisoners must fight to even see a doctor, let alone get adequate medical care. Trans people in particular are regularly denied basic medical needs, especially surgery and hormones. Many prisons have no guidelines for the care of trans and gender-variant persons, and even where guidelines exist, they are insufficient or not followed.⁴³ Inadequate policy and practice on HIV/AIDS and Hep C prevention is another major health problem in prison, where transmission rates are exceptionally high.⁴⁴ These risks increase dramatically for trans people, who already experience high rates of HIV/AIDS.⁴⁵ This combination of high transmission risks, poor healthcare provision, inadequate sexual health policies, and long-term health effects of imprisonment (including shorter life expectancies), mean that prison is a serious health hazard for queer and trans people.
- *Subject to solitary confinement and strip-searching:* Trans and gender-non-conforming prisoners are regularly placed in solitary confinement as a “solution” to the problem of sex-segregated prisons. Even when used for safety purposes, “protective custody” constitutes a form of punishment, as it usually means reduced access to recreational and educational programs, and increased psychological stress as a result of isolation. Trans and gender-non-conforming people are also frequently subject to humiliating, degrading, abusive, and overtly transphobic strip-searches.⁴⁶
- *High risk of self-harm and suicide:* Queer and trans people, especially youth, have higher rates of suicide attempts and self-harm. Such risks increase in prison and are heightened in segregation, particularly when prisoners are isolated from queer and trans supports.⁴⁷ These risks are not limited to incarceration but continue after release. A study in Britain for example, found that men who leave prison were eight times more likely to commit suicide than the general population, and women released from prison were thirty-six times more likely to commit suicide.⁴⁸

The prison system is literally killing, damaging, and harming people from our communities. Whether we consider physical death caused by self-harm, medical neglect, and state violence; social death caused by subsequent unemployment, homelessness, and stigmatization; or civil death experienced through political disenfranchisement and exclusion from citizenship rights, the violence of imprisonment is undeniable.

5. Ending violence against queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people requires a focus on the prison industrial complex.

The pervasiveness of state violence against queer and transgender people is reason enough to fight the prison industrial complex. But it is important to include anti-prison work as part of antiviolence struggles more broadly. Too often mainstream antiviolence work around hate crimes, sexual violence, child, and partner abuse excludes or remains disconnected from struggles against state violence.

Incorporating anti-prison work within broader antiviolence struggles is vital because prisons perpetuate—rather than break—cycles of violence. People are less likely to cause harm to others when they feel part of a community, because social inclusion brings both supports and responsibilities. Yet prisons have the opposite effect: Prisons remove people from their communities, isolate them from social support, and disconnect them from frameworks of accountability. During their sentences, many prisoners become estranged from their families and separated from partners. Many lose their personal possessions and most lose their jobs. Imprisonment also exacerbates mental health issues.⁴⁹ As a result, people often come out of prison in a much worse position than when they went in, putting them at increased risk of the situations that landed them in prison in the first place. These effects can be devastating not only for prisoners but also for friends and family members. The British Social Exclusion Unit, for example, found that 65 percent of boys with a convicted parent are subsequently convicted themselves.⁵⁰ These cycles of social exclusion, poverty, and imprisonment pave the way for more harm and violence.

The criminal system also reduces community capacity to hold people to account for their actions. Though prison is often framed as a means of serving “justice” and “accountability,” this is rarely the case. At most, prisons demand accountability to the state rather than to the people who were actually affected by the original harm. Locking people away does not require that people respond to those they harmed or take responsibility for their actions. By removing from the community people who have committed harm, the state actually prevents communities from holding that person accountable. More importantly, imprisonment does not assist with collective healing processes nor does it work to prevent harms from recurring in future. Effective antiviolence work means developing alternative, community-based processes that prioritize the needs of those who were harmed, address underlying issues that lead to harm, and work to prevent future violence.

6. Prisons reinforce dominant relations of power, especially racism, classism, ableism, and colonial oppression.

The modern prison grew out of, and continues to be deeply embedded within, the European colonial project and the legacy of slavery.⁵¹ This history, which includes medical experimentation, forced psychiatric treatment, sterilization, and eugenics, continues to shape the contemporary prison system today. Whether we consider who is most targeted by prisons or the socio-economic power relations that sustain imprisonment, the prison industrial complex remains a fundamentally racist, classist, and ableist institution.⁵² The statistics on who is in prison make these realities painfully clear. In Britain, for example, although people of color made up less than 9 percent of the general population, they comprised 27 percent of prisoners in 2008.⁵³ Blacks in particular are seven times more likely than whites to be stopped and searched by police, and are far more likely to receive a custodial sentence if convicted of a crime.⁵⁴ In 2002, there were more African Caribbean entrants to prison (over 11,500) than there were to U.K. universities (around 8,000).⁵⁵ In Canada, Aboriginal women make up less than 2 percent of the general population but comprise 32 percent of women held in federal prison and are more likely to be classified as dangerous offenders than non-Aboriginals.⁵⁶ In the United States, 1 in every 9 African American men between the ages of 20 and 34 is now behind bars.⁵⁷ The vast majority of prisoners come from poor economic backgrounds, and people with mental health issues and learning disabilities are locked up at disproportionate rates.⁵⁸

While corporate media attempt to justify these differential rates with claims that some people are more criminal, the reality is that some people are more *criminalized*. For example, though blacks use drugs at similar (if not lower) rates than whites, they are up to ten times more likely to be admitted to prison for drug offenses than whites.⁵⁹ Governments, politicians, and corporate media continually reinvent images of prisoners as violent, pathological, and morally depraved people, but the vast majority are imprisoned for crimes related to poverty, social exclusion, and systemic oppression. Indeed, communities that are most criminalized tend also to be most victimized.⁶⁰ For example, in 2003, the Canadian Human Rights Commission found that 80 percent of all federally sentenced women were survivors of physical and/or sexual violence—and for Aboriginal women the rate increased to 90 percent.⁶¹ Drawing attention to these underlying factors is not to deny the harms that people in prison may have committed, but rather to put those acts in their social, economic, political, and

colonial contexts. When we recognize “crime” as symptomatic of broader social injustices rather than as individual “bad choices,” we are better able to devise strategies that address root causes and actually reduce harm and violence.

Queer and transgender communities are not immune from the oppressive logic of imprisonment. Not only do many of us internalize the racist, classist, ableist, and punitive norms of the prison system, but we also create our own kinds of oppressive cages when we uphold social barriers that exclude, marginalize, and stigmatize people in our communities. For this reason, it is important to prioritize, support, and take action in struggles against institutions such as prison, where such oppression is most rampant.⁶² Just as struggles against gender and sexuality-based oppression are distorted and incomplete without race, class, and disability analysis, struggles for social justice are incomplete without attention to the violence of cages.

7. Prisons and policing take vital resources away from much-needed community programs, services, and self-empowerment projects.

The economic costs of imprisonment are staggering. In 2008, for example, it cost an average of £45,000 per year (more than £120 per day) to keep a person in prison in England and Wales.⁶³ In Canada, the average cost per year to keep a person in a maximum security federal prison is \$110,223 (CAD) for men and \$150,867 for women. Medium and minimum security costs average \$70,000 per year.⁶⁴ In the United States, the average operational costs per prisoner in 2005 was \$23,876 (USD), and capital costs were estimated at \$65,000 per bed.⁶⁵

Contrary to mainstream media claims of lavish prisons, the high costs of prison do not reflect the living conditions that prisoners endure. In Britain, for example, public-sector prisons spend less than £2 per day on food for each prisoner, and official inspectorate reports reveal that prison conditions regularly breach minimum standards of hygiene and safety.⁶⁶ Moreover, many prison costs are also absorbed by the prisoners themselves who provide unpaid or cheap labor (£4 per week in England and Wales) to maintain prison operations.⁶⁷

Global expansion in the prison industrial complex, alongside growth in private industries that make profits from imprisonment, means that police and prison spending continue to rise. Over the past ten years, for example, US federal and state governments have increased police department budgets by 77 percent.⁶⁸ In 2007, total corrections spending in the United

States topped \$49 billion, up from \$12 billion in 1978.⁶⁹ Prison expenditure in Britain has increased from £2.84 billion in 1995 to £4.33 billion in 2006. The U.K. now spends more per capita on prisons than the US.⁷⁰

Increases in law enforcement budgets are directly related to cuts in welfare, housing, medical care, and community programming. Massive amounts of public money are being channeled into military, policing, and imprisonment regimes, while queer and trans-specific services, such as HIV prevention, drop-in centers, education supports, peer mentoring programs, employment training, and violence-prevention programs are chronically underfunded. Not surprisingly, there is an inverse relationship between the amount of money a country invests in social welfare and the amount of crime it experiences: States with better welfare systems and more equal distribution of wealth tend to have lower incarceration rates.⁷¹ When we consider what might be accomplished if even a fraction of prison and policing budgets were redirected into community-based violence prevention projects, the fiscal injustice of the prison system is even more striking.

8. Prison growth is reaching a global crisis, and LGBTQ people are becoming increasingly complicit in its expansion.

Using prisons, policing, and militarization as a response to social, political, and economic problems is a phenomenon that has grown dramatically in the past thirty years. Though the modern prison is a relatively new invention that only dates back to the 1800s, its most dramatic expansion in the United States, Canada, and Britain has occurred in the past thirty years.

Consider the following:

- Between 1994 and 2004, the number of children sentenced to penal custody in England and Wales increased by 90 percent, despite declining rates of recorded crime by children.⁷²
- As of April 2010, there were 12,918 people serving indefinite sentences in Britain, compared to fewer than 3,000 in 1992.⁷³
- The racial demographics of the US prison population underwent a complete reversal in a mere four decades, shifting from a population that was 70 percent white at mid-century to 70 percent black and Latino by the 1990s—even though racial patterns of “criminal activity” did not change significantly during that period.⁷⁴

- Between 1970 and 2001, the incarceration rate of women in the United States rose by a staggering 2,800 percent (5,600 women prisoners in 1970 and 161,200 in 2001).⁷⁵
- The number of people in the United States serving life sentences without parole increased by 22 percent between 2003 and 2008 (from 33,633 to 41,095).⁷⁶

Contrary to popular assumptions, prison populations are growing not because more people are committing crime, more people are being caught, or more people are being found guilty. Rather, sentences are getting longer, custodial sentences are given out with increasing frequency, and governments are widening the criminalization net by creating new criminal offenses.⁷⁷ Between 2000 to 2007, for example, the US Congress added 454 new offenses to the federal criminal code, which coincided with a 32 percent increase in the number of federal prisoners.⁷⁸ While in power from 1997 to 2010, the British Labour government created more than 3,600 new criminal offenses—almost one for every day it was in office.⁷⁹

Although many people assume that prison expansion is a response to increased crime, the main causes of prison expansion have less to do with so-called crime waves and more to do with political and economic policy: the “war on drugs,” the criminalization of homelessness and poverty, the lack of community support for people with mental health issues, the increased detention of undocumented workers, the expanding use of secret prisons, and the so-called war on terror.

Unfortunately, many LGBT organizations in Canada, Britain, and the United States—particularly white-dominated and class-privileged ones—are increasingly complicit in the forces of prison expansion: calling for increased penalties under hate crimes laws; participating in police, military, and prison officer recruitment campaigns; endorsing “law and order” politicians, contributing to gentrification of poor, working-class and immigrant neighborhoods; and supporting “quality of life” ordinances that drive queer and trans street youth from public spaces. To give a particularly chilling example, LGBT groups lobbying for the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crime Prevention Act in the United States (also known as the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act), recently found themselves in the unsavory position of supporting legislation that, thanks to a Republican amendment, included the death penalty among its available sanctions.⁸⁰ While several LGBT groups released statements

opposing the death penalty amendment, few acknowledged that hate crimes laws (which function primarily by applying harsher sentences to crimes deemed as hate-motivated) grow out of, and feed, the same punitive logics that sustain the death penalty. Ironically, most of the arguments used by LGBT groups to oppose the death penalty (for example, its racist application, lack of deterrent effect, and perpetuation of violence) also apply to the criminal justice system more broadly.⁸¹ Although the death penalty amendment was subsequently removed from the final legislation, by advocating for punishment-based hate crimes laws, LGBT groups nonetheless helped to legitimize imprisonment and channel further resources into locking people up—despite a lack of evidence that such measures reduce hate-motivated violence.⁸² It is also no coincidence that the act was passed as part the National Defense Authorization Bill, a package of reforms that provides \$680 billion to the US military “defense” budget, including \$130 billion (USD) for ongoing military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸³ Given the devastating effects of the prison industrial complex and its broader connections with militarism and empire, queer and trans people must end their complicity with such projects.⁸⁴

9. Prisons and police do not make queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming communities safer.

The biggest myth of prison industrial complex is that prisons and cops keep us safe. Yet when we examine state track records, prisons have failed to protect communities from violence. Just as criminal justice remedies for domestic violence have not kept women safe from harm, so too have prisons failed to protect queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people.⁸⁵

Although queer, trans, and gender-variant people are disproportionately subject to harassment, bullying, sexual assault, and violence, many do not feel safe going to the police for help. A recent U.K. study found that 1 in 5 lesbian and gay people had been a victim of homophobic hate crime in the last three years, yet 75 percent did not report it to the police. The incidents ranged from insults on the street to physical and sexual assaults. Of those incidents reported, half resulted in no action being taken, and two thirds of those who reported were offered no advice or support services.⁸⁶ Trans people are particularly vulnerable when reporting incidents to police, not only because of ID issues, but also because police routinely assume that trans people are suspects rather than witnesses or victims of crime.⁸⁷

Some argue that the answer to this problem is to encourage people to report violence to police and to advocate for criminal punishment against those who commit such acts of violence. But the introduction of hate crimes laws has not reduced violence against queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people. In fact, when we examine the overall impact of the criminal system, imprisonment has never worked effectively to protect communities from harm. Here's why:

Re-offending: Prisons have a terrible track record when it comes to re-offending. In Britain, approximately 65 percent of prisoners are re-convicted within two years of being released. For young men aged 18 to 20, reconviction rates tend to hover around 75 percent.⁸⁸ Though recidivism rates vary among particular groups and offenses (most people convicted of murder, for example, do not re-offend), Canada and the United States have similarly high re-offense rates overall.⁸⁹ A growing body of evidence also suggests that prison expansion tends to increase re-offense rates.⁹⁰

Deterrence: Prisons and punishment are poor mechanisms for deterring crime. Considerable evidence indicates, for example, that harsher sentences do not reduce crime, particularly with respect to youth. In some cases, harsher punishments may actually increase re-offense rates.⁹¹ Indeed, US states with the lowest incarceration rates also have the lowest crime rates.⁹² The logic that punishment will deter harm wrongly assumes that violence is the result of individual, rational decisions made in contexts of "free choice." While some violent acts are indeed premeditated (especially white-collar crime), most harms arise from a more complex set of social, political, and economic factors. Because prisons do not address but rather exacerbate these factors, the deterrent effects of imprisonment are limited. As former Senior Home Office researcher Carol Hedderman notes, "Prison will never be an effective crime-control tool because the evidence clearly demonstrates that it actively creates or compounds the factors that contribute to offending."⁹³

Rehabilitation: Rehabilitation programs have limited success and in some cases can actually cause more harm than good.⁹⁴ This is partly because most rehabilitation programs assume that the main problem lies in the individual rather than in broader social, economic, and po-

litical circumstances. Moreover, prison-based rehabilitation programs operate within coercive and disciplinary contexts and rarely coincide with adequate economic and social supports following release. By contrast, voluntary harm-reduction programs that take place within supportive community settings are generally more successful—and much less expensive.⁹⁵

The systematic failure of imprisonment is not only noted by anti-prison activists, but also widely recognized among criminologists, legal professionals, and even government officials. As the Daubney Commission (appointed by a Conservative Government) in Canada reported,

It is now generally recognized that imprisonment has not been effective in rehabilitating or reforming offenders, has not been shown to be a strong deterrent, and has achieved only temporary public protection and uneven retribution.... The use of imprisonment as a main response to a wide variety of offences against the law is not a tenable approach in practical terms.⁹⁶

Addressing violence within and against our communities is a far too serious, urgent, and widespread an issue to be left to a system that has proven to be an utter failure when it comes to community safety.

10. Alternatives to prisons will better prevent violence, strengthen queer and trans communities, and foster social, economic, and racial justice.

Prison abolition is not a call to suddenly fling open the prison doors without enacting alternatives. Nor is it an appeal to a utopian ideal. Abolition is a broad-based, practical vision for building models today that practice how we want to live in the future. Practicing alternatives requires different starting points, questions, and assumptions than those underlying the current system. The existing criminal justice model poses two main questions in the face of social harm: Who did it? How can we punish them? (And increasingly, how can we make money from it?). Creating safe and healthy communities requires a different set of questions: Who was harmed? How can we facilitate healing? How can we prevent such harm in the future?⁹⁷ Developing alternatives with these latter goals in mind prioritizes the needs of people who have been harmed and emphasizes more holistic, prevention-oriented responses to violence. Such frameworks not only re-

duce the need for prisons, but also work to strengthen communities by reducing oppression and building community capacity more broadly.

Abolitionist strategies differ from reformist tactics by working to reduce, rather than strengthen, the power of the prison industrial complex.⁹⁸ Prison reforms, however well-intentioned, have tended to extend the life and scope of prisons. So-called “gender-responsive” prisons are a prime example; reforms intended to address the needs of women have led to increased punishment and imprisonment of women, not less. By contrast, abolitionist strategies embrace tactics that undermine the prison system rather than feed it.

There are many different approaches to abolition, some of which are outlined in the classic “Instead of Prisons Handbook.”⁹⁹ To highlight a few:

- *Starve the system.* Abolition means starving the prison industrial complex to death—depriving it of financial resources, human resources, access to fear-mongering, and other sustaining rhetoric.¹⁰⁰ Enacting a moratorium on prison expansion is one key strategy; this means preventing governments and private companies from building any new prisons, jails, or immigration detention spaces; prohibiting increases in police and prison budgets; and boycotting companies that make a profit from imprisonment. Starving the prison system means fighting new laws that increase prison time or create new criminal offenses (for example, hate crimes laws and mandatory minimum sentences), and redirecting money and resources into community-based alternatives.
- *Stop using cages.* Prisons are just one of the many cages that harm our communities. Racism, colonialism, capitalism, and ableism are other kinds of cages, which both sustain the prison system and give it force. Dismantling the prison industrial complex means working to eliminate all cages that foster violence and oppression. Taking this broad approach is especially important when developing alternatives, since some strategies (like electronic tagging or surveillance cameras) simply replace old cages with new ones. Getting people out of cages and preventing people from being put in those cages—even one person at a time—is a key abolitionist strategy.
- *Develop effective alternatives.* Dismantling the prison industrial complex is impossible without developing alternative community

protocols for addressing violence and harm. Creating abolitionist alternatives means encouraging non-punitive responses to harm, enacting community-based mechanisms of social accountability, and prioritizing prevention. Such alternatives include restorative/transformative justice initiatives, community-based restitution projects, social and economic support networks, affordable housing, community education projects, youth-led recreational programs, free accessible healthcare services, empowerment-based mental health, addiction and harm reduction programs, quality employment opportunities, anti-poverty measures, and support for self-determination struggles.¹⁰¹

- *Practice everyday abolition.* Prison abolition is not simply an end goal but also an everyday practice. Being abolitionist is about changing the ways we interact with others on an ongoing basis and changing harmful patterns in our daily lives. Abolitionist practice mean questioning punitive impulses in our intimate relationships, rethinking the ways that we deal with personal conflicts, and reducing harms that occur in our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools. In this way, “living abolition” is part of the daily practice of creating a world without cages.

Conclusion

Among the many strengths of queer and trans communities is an acute ability to challenge social norms that discipline dissident bodies. As an institution whose violent effects cause massive damage to bodies both inside and beyond its walls, the prison should be a key target for queer/trans analysis and action. At the same time, abolishing the prison industrial complex is not only about getting rid of prisons; it is about integrating abolitionist analysis and practice into broader social, economic, and racial justice struggles. Whether fighting for trans access to housing and welfare, demanding the decriminalization of sex work, engaging in antiviolence work, or campaigning for free accessible healthcare, all our politics must be infused with an abolitionist analysis. Likewise, prison activism that does not consider the gender/sexuality dimensions of imprisonment will be unable to undo the roots of our cage-obsessed cultures. The task then is to engage in social change using strategies that bring a queer/trans analysis to the prison industrial complex and bring a prison abolition analysis to queer/trans struggles. Without integrating both, we'll neglect the very cages that prevent us from working toward broader social justice goals.

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3. Recognizing the inability of a single term to encapsulate the fluidity and specificity of people's gender and sexual identities, and noting both the overlapping and distinct dimensions of these identities, I use gender and sexual identity terms in the following ways: By *queer*, I refer to people whose sexual desires, identities, and practices do not conform to heterosexual norms (including, but also going beyond, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, two-spirit, and queer people). By *trans*, I refer to people who identify or express gender differently than what is traditionally associated with the sex they were assigned at birth (e.g. transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, male-to-female, female-to-male). By *gender-non-conforming*, I refer to people whose gender presentation or identity does not conform to gender norms or expectations (e.g. women who present in a masculine way but nonetheless identify as women, as well as androgynous, gender-fluid, and gender ambiguous people).
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MAROON ABOLITIONISTS:

Black Gender-Oppressed Activists in the Anti-Prison Movement in the US and Canada

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Since the 1970s, the exponential growth in incarceration in the US, combined with racial targeting in the use of state surveillance and punishment, has marked the prison as a primary site of contemporary struggles for racial and economic justice. At the same time, US-style penal politics have migrated across the border, generating resistance by disenfranchised communities in Canada (Roberts et al. 2002; Prisoners Justice Action Committee 2007). There are very significant differences in the scale and practice of imprisonment in the US and Canada. The US currently incarcerates approximately 2.3 million people, or 762 per 100,000, compared to approximately 35,000, or 108 per 100,000 in Canada (International Centre for Prison Studies 2008). Moreover, whereas “tough-on-crime” reforms over the past decades have led to the widespread construction

of “warehouse” prisons (Irvin and Austin 1997), a range of alternatives—from “community corrections” to restorative justice—have limited prison expansion in Canada (Pate 1999). However, there are also important and growing synergies between sentencing and penal policy in both nations. At a provincial level, conservative politicians have vigorously pursued a neoliberal, tough-on-crime approach, leading to the emergence of “no frills” provincial superjails, some built or managed by US corporations. At a federal level, critics have predicted a US-style prison building boom as the Harper government has begun to fulfill its promise to “turn around” thirty to forty years of “soft” criminal justice policy (Roslin 2007; Whittington 2008). In both countries, anti-prison activists have developed an analysis and critique of the prison industrial complex, its role in producing and maintaining racial inequalities and the need for abolition rather than reform, indicating the existence of an anti-prison movement that crosses national borders (Sudbury 2004a).

The contemporary anti-prison movement is made up of a wide range of organizations with diverse goals. These include ending the war on drugs; advocating for prisoners’ health needs; spiritual freedom; family integrity and basic human rights; challenging sexual violence in prisons; working for women, queer, and trans prisoners; releasing “war on terror” detainees; ending the criminalization and detention of immigrants; protesting police brutality and racial profiling; working for the freedom of political prisoners and exiles; opposing construction of new prisons; divesting from prison construction and prison privatization; ending the death penalty; and building community-based alternatives to incarceration. This article examines the experiences of black gender-oppressed activists¹ in the anti-prison movement in the US and Canada.²

During the past decade, I have developed a body of scholarship that seeks to elucidate the articulation of race, gender, and punishment through the lens of women of color’s imprisonment and resistance.³ In this new work, I have expanded that focus to include transgender and gender-non-conforming people.⁴ In so doing, I aim to mirror the reality of gender complexity and multiplicity both within the prison and in anti-prison organizing, and to reject the unquestioned compliance with the binary gender system in most feminist research on prisons, including my own. At the same time, I have chosen to focus on *black* activists rather than on activists of color in order to foreground the ways in which often overlooked African diasporic cultural and political legacies inform and undergird anti-prison work. The article explores the activists’ motiva-

tions for involvement and barriers to participation, and explores spirituality as a source of resilience and guidance. It examines the participants' political analysis and abolitionist visions, and explores the possibility of "non-reformist reforms" that take up the challenge of a radical anti-racist gender justice perspective. The article posits the existence of a unique abolitionist vision and praxis, centered on the participants' direct experience of gender oppression and racialized surveillance and punishment and rooted in African diasporic traditions of resistance and spirituality.⁵

My research methodology draws from the insights of feminist action research and participatory action research. The research is grounded in ten years of activist ethnography in the anti-prison movement in the US and Canada.⁶ In addition, I interviewed eight black⁷ women and transgender activists between the ages of twenty and thirty-two from the US and Canada during 2007. The participants had been involved in anti-prison activism in Ottawa, Vancouver, Toronto and environs, New York, the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, and Lagos, Nigeria.⁸ Most had been involved in more than one anti-prison organization, and several had held both volunteer and paid positions, although the paid positions were seldom full-time or well-remunerated and tended to grow out of prior volunteer work. Participants represented considerable diversity in terms of gender and sexual orientation: four described their gender as woman or female, and four chose the following gender-non-conforming labels: transsexual/trans-guy, trans/gender-variant/faggot, gender-queer, and two-spirited.⁹ Three identified their sexual orientation as hetero(sexual), with the remainder identifying as queer, gay, faggot, free-loving, bisexual, or fluid. Participants also had diverse experiences of class, social mobility, and the criminal justice system; two had personal experience of imprisonment, and all had family members or loved ones who had been in conflict with the law.

"Love and Anger": Reasons for Resistance

The 1960s and 70s were marked by the rise of what have been labeled "new social movements" based on racial, gender, and sexual identities. Starting from these social locations, activists generated radical critiques of interlocking systems of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and compulsory heterosexuality (Melucci 1989; Combahee River Collective 1995). Despite recognizing the power of identity politics, commentators have also been critical of its tendency to promote a hierarchy of oppression and to separate oppressed groups along lines of race and gender, thus limiting possibilities for coalitional work, particularly around a common

resistance to capitalist exploitation. The emergence of the global justice, anti-war, and anti-prison movements in the 1990s and 2000s marks a resurgence of movement-building based on a shared political analysis rather than on a shared social location.¹⁰ As an ideology-based rather than an identity-based movement, the anti-prison movement engages a wide range of activists, including those with relative privilege in relation to interlocking systems of oppression. By making visible the multifaceted ways in which the prison industrial complex affects all of us, anti-prison organizations have successfully generated a wide base of support among those indirectly affected by mass incarceration, such as teachers and students, affected by swollen corrections budgets and education funding cuts. This approach has been critically important in building a mass movement to resist the prison industrial complex. At the same time, this research points to the importance of bringing social location back into ideology-based movements, in this instance by foregrounding the analysis and praxis of activists who have been *directly affected* by the prison industrial complex.¹¹

All participants in this study testified that they had been directly affected by the prison industrial complex. This occurred in three ways. First, participants spoke about their experiences of policing and surveillance. For several of the participants, these experiences constituted powerful childhood memories that continued to be a source of trauma and a motivator for resistance. Jamila shared a painful memory of her father being pulled over by police in a Toronto suburb:

I thought my Dad was going to be taken to jail; I didn't know what was going on. I remember thinking I was never going to see him again and I also remember the look on his face. He was sitting in the back of the squad car and I was on the lawn and I just remember him looking at me and there was a look of shame and embarrassment...that I will never forget. And anger too. He wasn't given a ticket and he didn't go to jail, it was just a clear-cut case of racial profiling.

As a child, Jamila had no tools with which to understand her father's humiliation at the hands of the state. As she became more politicized, she was able to put the incident into a wider perspective and to understand it as part of a collective experience of racist policing. In so doing, she channeled the pain and anger as a source for resistance. Experiences of police harassment led participants to reject common beliefs taught to children growing up with race and class privilege. Rather than believing that the

police were there to protect them, and that people are arrested because they have done something wrong, the participants learned to fear the police as agents of social control and state violence.

The second way in which participants had been directly affected by the prison industrial complex is through having one or more family members imprisoned or working within the prison system. Six of the participants had had a family member in prison or on probation at some point in their life. Growing up poor and black in upstate New York, the prison was a central part of Jac's family landscape:

My Dad had been a prison guard at Attica for about eleven years. He was hired just after the uprising because one of the things they decided to do was hire more black guards, as if that would actually make any difference.¹² And I also have another uncle who was also a guard in New York State and I had another uncle, their brother, who was imprisoned in New York. So the prison industrial complex was a huge part of our family understanding.

For Maya, the incarceration of family members was an everyday occurrence creating immense challenges for those left caring for dependents on the outside:

Of course everyone I know has some sort of family or friend who is currently or has been incarcerated. Including myself, so I've had cousins in and out. Mainly all women and separated from their children. And seeing the impact that's had on our family has been horrific. So since very young, I've always known that there was something very wrong with this so-called correctional [system].

Maya's experience of the criminal punishment system was double-edged. At the same time that the criminal punishment system created havoc in their lives, her family also grasped at it as the only "solution" available for problems including addiction and gender violence. The solution offered, however, was, as she recognized, temporary and illusory, leaving the family further entrenched in a cycle of state and interpersonal violence:

The same cousin, her partner was extraordinarily abusive to her and to my great aunt, and we stepped in to separate them. But the only way to provide safety for the children and my great aunt, and my cousin to a

certain extent, is to separate them, and unfortunately we ended up involving the state and he was arrested. So what are alternatives to that? So again he ends up coming out, they get back together, same thing happens all over again. Again the problem's not solved, so what do we do?

Like Jac's family, Maya's family was forced to rely for safety on the very system that was disappearing family members. Reflecting on the impact of his sister's imprisonment on his childhood experiences, Nathaniel pointed to the sometimes irreparable damage to relationships caused by these disappearances:

You just miss this whole part of somebody's life. That to me seems like the biggest thing, it's just missing time. To me that is one of the things that I think was so disastrous within my own family. Whether you go to Memphis and somebody's just not there.... Or like with my sister, there was a significant portion of her life and of my life that we just didn't get to know each other.

When he was first exposed to anti-prison activism, Nathaniel began to view his family history through the lens of what he was learning and went back to talk to family members about their experiences of criminalization and imprisonment. This personal connection further fueled his commitment to the work.

The third way that participants had been affected was through personal experiences of arrest, prosecution, and incarceration. Two of the participants had been incarcerated. Although Bakari's father had been in prison, it was the experience of being imprisoned in the California state system for two years that s/he found radicalizing.¹³ When s/he was left in a cell moaning in pain all night after guards refused requests for medical attention, Bakari was shocked and surprised. Gradually, s/he awakened to the fact that as a prisoner s/he had lost any rights as a US citizen. It was this realization that fueled a commitment to bring about change:

It was that instinctual feeling that you guys are crazy, something's wrong for you to be treating people like this. I would say things to the police inside like: do you understand that this is a violation of my civil rights, do you understand that I'm an American citizen? Because I didn't know that when I was incarcerated, I had no civil rights, I was not viewed as a citizen.

Multiple experiences of criminalization were a powerful motivator for the participants. But gaining access to a collective movement analysis was equally important. Trey was raised by his grandmother while his mother was in and out of jail for drug use, and was sent to Spofford Juvenile Facility in upstate New York at age thirteen for fighting in school. From there, he served time for a series of property and drug-related offenses before finding the Audre Lorde project, where he served as an intern. The political education he received there led to a lifelong commitment to penal abolition fueled by his personal experiences. When asked what motivated him, Trey responded:

My love and my anger. That I love my people and my heritage and what I know we can become too much to let it go down. And I'm angered by the oppression and the f*****g atrocities that I see every day that are committed against my people and myself. It makes me too mad to just sit down and let it happen. And it makes me too mad to just close my eyes and pretend it's not there.

The testimonies of black gender-oppressed activists reveal that even as we come together to work for social change based on our shared political analysis, rather than shared identities, we can reintroduce some of the strengths of identity politics. This is not to fetishize racialized and gendered bodies, but to tap the mobilizing force of personal experience and to rebuild some of the community power stripped by daily encounters with state violence and repression.

Maroon Abolitionism: Visions of Freedom

[W]hat makes me the most angry is that everybody's sitting there kicking it. Not knowing that they're building plantations.

—Bakari

The second distinct characteristic of anti-prison activism by black gender-oppressed activists is the development of an abolitionist vision shaped by direct confrontations with the prison industrial complex and imbued with the historical memory of slavery and rebellion. In the 1970s, political prisoners like Angela Y. Davis and Assata Shakur in conjunction with other radical activists and scholars in the US, Canada, and Europe began to shape a new anti-prison politics that combined campaigns for freedom for political prisoners with a call for the dismantling of prisons (Knopp

et al. 1976). The explosion in political prisoners, fueled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) and targeting of black liberation, American Indian, and Puerto Rican independence movements in the US and First Nations resistance in Canada as "threats" to national security, fed into an understanding of the role of the prison in perpetuating state repression against insurgent communities (Churchill and Wall 1996; López 1996; James 2003). The new anti-prison politics were also shaped by a decade of prisoner litigation and radical prison uprisings, including the Attica Rebellion in 1971, which was brutally crushed by New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. The "Attica Brothers"—working-class people of color imprisoned for everyday acts of survival—challenged the state's legitimacy by declaring imprisonment a form of cruel and unusual punishment and confronting the brute force of state power (Parenti 1999; Gilmore 2000).

By adopting the term "abolition," activists in the US and Canada drew deliberate links between the dismantling of prisons and the abolition of slavery. Through historical excavations, the "new abolitionists" identified the abolition of prisons as the logical completion of the unfinished liberation marked by the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which regulated rather than ended slavery (James 2005). Learning the truth about this "enslaving anti-enslavement document" (Gilmore 2000, xxi) was a galvanizing experience for several of the participants in this study. Maya viewed her work for freedom from persecution for political exile Assata Shakur as part of a broader struggle against penal slavery:

The first time I found out about the Thirteenth Amendment was in Assata's book, and a lot of people didn't know that the Thirteenth Amendment had a "but" clause. So that means that people are still legally enslaved in this country. That's what inspired me also.... If you are against enslavement, how are you for prison? When legally they say that you can be enslaved.

Some scholars have critiqued the slavery–prison analogy, arguing that since work is a "privilege" coveted by and denied many prisoners, the prison should be considered a warehouse rather than a new form of slavery, subjecting its captives to incapacitation rather than forced labor (Gilmore 2007, 21). However, in focusing narrowly on slavery as a mode of labor, this critique minimizes the continuities between ideologies and

practices of slavery and mass incarceration that make slavery a useful interpretive frame (Sudbury 2004b; Rodríguez 2006, 225–29). As Joy James argues:

Prison is the modern-day manifestation of the plantation. The antebellum plantation ethos of dehumanization was marked by master–slave relations revolving about sexual terror and domination, beatings, regimentation of bodies, exploited labor, denial of religious and cultural practices, substandard food, health care and housing, forced migration, isolation in “lockdown” for punishment and control, denial of birth family and kin. That ethos is routinely practiced and reinscribed in contemporary penal sites. (James 2005, xxiii)

Participants in this study frequently referenced the institution of slavery as a framework for understanding contemporary experiences of surveillance, policing, and criminalization. They explained the continuing enslavement of poor black communities through the story of her birth:

One day when my mother was in the house by herself, the police knocked on the door, and my mother...let them in and the police officer who’s my father raped my mother. That’s how I got here.... When we talk about slavery I don’t have to go back three hundred odd years, I can go back to 1980 and have a real case of slave rape, the overseer/master raping the slave who in this case would be my mother who is a slave to the narcotics that were pushed into our community.

Trey brings our attention to the extension of state surveillance and punishment throughout poor communities of color that occurred from the late 1970s under the guise of the war on drugs.¹⁴ Reinforced by state power, the police officer/overseer turned Trey’s mother’s house into a site of captivity and sexual-racial terror, marking a set of continuities among the prison, the urban ’hood, and the slave plantation.

By linking slavery and prisons, the concept of abolition also highlights the interaction of racial and economic dynamics in processes of mass incarceration. Participants were acutely aware of the role of prisons in sustaining the current mode of capitalist exploitation. Samia continued the slavery–prison analogy at a global level, pointing to the attenuated privilege awarded US blacks in comparison to black people elsewhere:

Globalization has created an international plantation.... I've begun to see symbolically that black people in the US represent house-slaves and that black people in the diaspora represent field-slaves. And that globalization has made that plantation of racist relationships a global one. And prisons are for the people that don't fit in the field or the house.

Samia's social location as a black woman from Canada with roots in North Africa acts as a site of epistemic privilege producing an insightful and nuanced analysis of US empire. As an African-Canadian who has moved to the US, Samia is an "outsider-within" in relation to both US global power and African American discourses of oppression and resistance (Collins 2000, 11–13). This critical lens enables her to identify the simultaneity of racial subordination and imperial privilege, suggesting that transnational solidarities must be formed not around an assumed sameness of racial oppression, but around a complex understanding of differential racisms in the context of global inequalities. These unequal positionalities rest upon both violent colonial histories and contemporary geopolitical and economic formations. This means that while black people in the US, Canada, Africa, and the Caribbean are all affected by the neoliberal economic reforms and cutbacks in spending on social welfare and education that have accompanied the globalization of capital, the impact is refracted through the particularities of local socioeconomic conditions (Steady 2002). These systemic cutbacks, coupled with inflated spending on forms of global and domestic social control, indicate the continued devaluing and dehumanization of black people and other people of color.¹⁵ Maya pointed to this contradiction:

We have horrifically dilapidated schools with inadequate resources, no computers, no materials, teachers underpaid, we don't have health clinics. There are so many resources we need in our poor communities, communities of color. How do we have billions of dollars for this war? How do we have a million dollars to try to re-enslave a woman who fought for her political beliefs?¹⁶

Just as the dehumanization of captives was central to maintaining the economic system of plantation slavery, the dehumanization of people of color through racialized and criminalizing ideologies legitimates the devastation wrought by capitalist globalization. Abolition is therefore not only

about ending the violence of imprisonment, but also about claiming public resources and declaring the value of human life over corporate profit.

I have chosen to name the political vision of black gender-oppressed anti-prison activists “maroon abolitionism” for two reasons. First, “maroon” serves to identify the tactics of those directly affected by slavery/incarceration. The word “maroon” refers to the communities of runaway slaves, indigenous peoples, and their descendants that formed throughout the Americas beginning in the seventeenth century (Price 1996).¹⁷ While maroon communities existed outside of the violent social control of the slave state, they were both under threat by and at war with re-enslaving forces.¹⁸ As maroon abolitionists, black gender-oppressed activists know that the consequences of failing to achieve abolition are that they themselves, their family members, and their loved ones will continue to be disappeared. Bakari articulated the maroon experience of constant threat from the penal/slave system: “We like the free Negroes in Alabama down South. Some of us scared because hell they going to come and get us too.”

Whereas white abolitionists were guided by moral convictions, for ex-slaves and their loved ones abolition was the only avenue for liberation from the threat of captivity, torture, and social death. Hence, slaves and those who had escaped slavery rejected white abolitionists’ calls for gradual emancipation through indentureship that would keep formerly enslaved African Americans tied to the land; they demanded nothing less than the immediate end of slavery. Popular histories tend to focus on formerly enslaved African Americans who sought to win white support through speeches and slave narratives, while less attention is paid to the slave rebellions, mass escapes, and maroon insurgencies that fundamentally challenged the viability and hastened the demise/restriction of chattel slavery. Twenty-first-century maroon abolitionism is also rooted in the survival imperative, guided by a sense of urgency and informed by an understanding of the prison industrial complex as a war on black communities. Samia articulated her vision of abolitionist work as a form of self-defense:

In terms of prisons and the penal system, I think that it’s at the center of a lot of our oppression. So my options are to live oppressed or to fight this. So I prefer to fight it. I think that as people of color we have no option but to fight it. It’s a matter of survival. I also think that we are at war, that we are under attack, through different institutions and

cultures and social practices. And when you are at war you have no option but to fight back.

By conceptualizing state policies toward disenfranchised communities as a war, Samia implicitly refutes a prison-reform agenda, and pushes us to adopt an uncompromising position against the prison industrial complex. As Dylan Rodríguez points out, the state has long declared a series of domestic “wars”—against crime, drugs, gangs, and now terror—involving official declarations, mobilizations, and body counts, which have been waged in the streets and homes of low-income communities of color and immigrant communities (Rodríguez 2008). In claiming the language of war and mobilizing it against the state, Samia brings a radical positionality and sense of urgency common to the political visions articulated by the participants in the study.

Second, while it honors the participants’ understanding of contemporary incarceration as a continuation of slavery, the concept “maroon abolitionist” avoids implying that the society outside the prison is “free.” Joy James argues that we must reject the illusion that a return to civil society via parole or clemency constitutes an escape to the liberated “North” (James 2005, xxx). Instead, state penal practices exist on a continuum from the prison, the juvenile hall, and the detention center to the urban ’hood, the reservation, the school, and the welfare office where surveillance, policing, and punishment extend far beyond the prison walls. Trey’s story told above is one example of the extension of captivity beyond the prison walls. Continuing her analysis, Trey argues that prison abolition involves far more than the abolition of the physical prison building:

When I say the prisons, I mean the physical prison itself, but also the prisons we create in our communities. Whether those are physical like the projects that the government keeps building up and locking us in, and also the mental ones that we put ourselves in, all the social constructs that society projects on us.... If we have so many drug crimes and we have so many property crimes, then let’s start addressing the mental health of our people and the economic development of our communities. Let’s get to the root causes of why people commit crimes.

Jamila elaborated on this expansive vision of maroon abolitionist politics by distinguishing between emancipation and abolition. Rather than ending imprisonment in an otherwise unchanged society, emancipation

indicates the transformation of society and an end to racism and capitalist inequality.

We've seen abolition of slavery but the ramification of sanctioned apartheid still remains. Abolition literally means the end of something, whereas emancipation means to free or liberate. So how we understand that is critical to how we do anti-prison work. So a world without prisons would mean a world with healing, it would mean a world that had alternatives, it would mean forgiveness, it would mean justice, it would mean the eradication of poverty....

One limitation of the slavery–prison analogy is that it tends to erase the presence of non-black prisoners. This is problematic both in Canada, where First Nations prisoners suffer the most dramatic rates of incarceration, and in the US, where Latinas/os are a rapidly growing incarcerated population (Díaz-Cotto 2006).¹⁹ While slavery was premised on the black/white binary, maroon communities rejected this racist logic. Maroon settlements incorporated resisting Indians and exiled whites as well as runaway slaves, and offered a radical multiracial alternative to North American apartheid.²⁰ As such, marronage offers a model for “black-brown” coalitions and reminds black activists of the value of learning from indigenous knowledges. Women from the Native Sisterhood at Grand Valley Institution for Women, for example, taught Jamila about “a form of accountability, an alternative form of justice that is grounded in the teachings from different Native nations.” Although some of the participants reported not having worked with indigenous people or Latinas/os, activists like Jamila demonstrate the importance of non-black “outlyer” knowledges for contemporary abolitionist work.

Maroon abolitionism is dedicated to the creation of a world in which prison is obsolete.²¹ However, the participants did not limit their activism to this long-term goal. Instead, they were involved in challenging human rights abuses and advocating for the immediate needs of prisoners. For Bakari, this meant working to challenge overcrowding and medical neglect in California women's prisons:

Of course we have to deal with what's going on right now. So right now I want for people to live in humane conditions until we can figure out a way to get rid of prison as a form of social control. So right now what I want is all the beds off the day room. To have people

treated in a humane way. But my goal is not to have prisons. My goal is not to have capitalism.

These “non-reformist reforms” create solidarity with prisoners while paying attention to the penal system’s tendency to co-opt reforms to consolidate and expand prisons. By carrying out their reformist work as part of a broader strategy of decarceration, abolition, and fundamental social transformation, maroon abolitionists address the immediate needs of captives while ultimately challenging the legitimacy of their captivity. Black gender-oppressed activists’ advocacy for transgender and gender-non-conforming prisoners is one example of non-reformist reform: demands for change that challenge the logic of incarceration while simultaneously addressing prisoners’ immediate needs.

Trans/forming Anti-prison Work: Beyond the Gender Binary

During the past decade, transgender and gender-non-conforming activists, both imprisoned and non-imprisoned, have worked to end the human rights abuses faced by transgender prisoners while also tackling the incarceration.²² The participants in this study moved beyond the human rights implications of this work to generate a radical critique of the state’s power to delimit and police gender. In so doing, they produced an anti-racist, gender-queer, anti-prison praxis that constitutes a challenge to the violent gender regime of the penal system and suggests new dimensions of abolitionist thought.

Penal systems are based on the premise of a rigid and fixed gender binary that, as Bakari points out, ignores the actuality of gender fluidity and multiplicity in society as a whole and within the prison in particular:

You have male and female prisons. I ain’t male or female, so which one do I get to go to? And you’re housed according to your genitalia, which to me does not connote gender.

By reducing gender to biological sex represented by prisoners’ genitalia, prison administrators routinely violate the right to self-determination of prisoners who do not match the narrow range of sex/gender identification allowed within the prison. This is particularly devastating for transsexual prisoners. Since many transsexuals do not choose or cannot afford gender reassignment surgery, prisoners who may have had hormone treatment and “top surgery” (to remove breasts) will be assigned

to an institution according to a gender assignment based on one part of their body, which does not match the rest of their physical and emotional experience. The psychological and physical impact can be devastating, as Nathaniel shared based on his experiences of advocacy work in Ontario prisons:

[F]or trans people depression and suicide, you can have really high risk factors for that when you're consistently being denied for who you are. When people take away your opportunity to have self-determination which happens in many ways in prison, but can be so detrimental when you're a trans woman and you're put in a men's prison, and you're denied your hormones and you're denied being called the name that you chose and you're being called he all the time.

The denial of adequate medical treatment to transgender prisoners, including but not limited to a failure to continue hormone treatment, constitutes a form of state violence enacted on prisoners' bodies and psyches (Richard 2000b).²³ In this context, the denial of adequate medical care is one method by which the state punishes gender non-conformity.

The penal system seeks to produce women's prisons inhabited by female women and men's prisons inhabited by male men, out of a population that in actuality embraces an immense range of gender diversity. In addition to transsexual prisoners who may or may not be on hormones and/or in the process of transitioning surgically, this includes butch lesbians, feminine gay men, and transgender, gender-queer, and two-spirited prisoners who identify as neither male nor female nor in transition. Since transgender and gender-non-conforming individuals are more likely to be stopped by police, both because of higher rates of homelessness and involvement in street economies arising from discrimination and familial rejection, and because of police profiling and harassment, the prison is actually a site of heightened gender variation (Amnesty International 2006). The process—and ultimately unattainable objective—of producing binary gender in the prison is one that enacts psychological, emotional, and physical violence on all transgender and gender-non-conforming prisoners. Bakari shared a critique of gender policing in the California Institution for Women:

How they control you and mandate you to this gender binary is if you're in a women's facility you must wear whatever society says is for

women.... At CIW when I first got there, I had on boxers, they took them, said they were contraband.... Then they make you wear panties and a muumuu, an old lady housedress.... When the new people come in, all the women stand there to see if it's their friends coming in and you gotta walk by in this muumuu.

Although a relatively androgynous uniform of jeans and a t-shirt was standard issue, Bakari's masculinity was ritually stripped in front of the general population on arrival at the institution before s/he was allowed to don clothes more appropriate to the way s/he self-identified. The practice of forcing people in women's prisons to wear clothes constructed as gender-appropriate is common, and many women's prisons have rules mandating a minimum number of items of "female" attire. Policing prisoners' underwear becomes a sign of the state's power to control the most intimate aspects of prisoners' lives. In this sense, gender policing is an everyday and central part of the prison regime's brutal exercise of power over its inhabitants.

Vulnerability to physical and sexual violence is also of critical concern for transgender and gender-non-conforming prisoners. Recent research and activism has made visible the systemic and epidemic nature of sexual violence in men's prisons (Human Rights Watch 2001; Sabo et al. 2001, 109–38).²⁴ However, research and advocacy in this area tends to focus on gender-conforming men who have been targeted because of their perceived physical weakness or inexperience with prison life, rather than foregrounding the endemic sexual violence against transgender and gender-non-conforming prisoners. The scant research that does examine the experiences of transgender prisoners has focused on the institutional abuse and rape of transsexual MtF (male-to-female) prisoners in men's prisons, largely ignoring women's prisons (Edney 2004). The elimination of violence against gender-non-conforming prisoners in women's prisons relies on the invisibility of gender-non-conforming women and FtMs (female-to-male transgender people), as well as on erroneous gendered assumptions that women's prisons are kinder, softer environments than men's prisons. As Bakari explained, violence targeted at transgressive masculinity in women's prisons is part of a spectrum of violence fostered by the totalizing institution of the prison:

[T]he butch women are the ones who are targeted because they are the ones who are most different. And the men feel intimidated in

there. If they try to resist or question, they get the smackdown a lot sooner. Like they get hit, punched, thrown down to the ground.... There was one trans man in CCWF that had facial hair that was put in segregated housing for refusing to shave their facial hair.... Because it's arbitrary power in there. They can virtually do whatever it is they want unabated, unchecked, unquestioned. To your body, to your soul, to your spirit.

It is not only guards who enact this regime of violent punishment of gender non-conformity. Other prisoners are often complicit in the policing and abuse of transgender prisoners. Prisoner violence, including sexual assault, is often represented as the inevitable outcome of containing “violent criminals” in a confined space, with guards preventing the violence as best they can. This narrative leads to the common practice of placing transsexual prisoners in administrative segregation, ostensibly for their own protection, where they are isolated in highly restricted conditions otherwise used as punishment for “unruly” prisoners (Richard 2000a). However, the participants in this study argued that institutional transphobia supported violent and exploitative acts by other prisoners. Jac spoke from experience of activist work in men's prisons in California:

[P]risons create gangs because they create the need to create your own safety. But different groupings will not accept someone on the basis of some part of their identity. So for black trans women one of the black groupings will say “We don't want you.” Or “We'll only have you if you sleep with all of us and give us all favors.” So it means having to find a husband immediately and he's not a good one you can be out of luck. And being out of luck means being raped on a regular basis. Being harassed by guards on a regular basis...It's OK to be racist to trans women because they're “traitors to the race.”

Jac points to the way in which racism and transphobia intersect within the prison to create an atmosphere of extreme vulnerability to violence for transgender prisoners of color. This interaction between racism and transphobia in the prison is the basis for an antiracist, gender-queer, anti-prison agenda promoted by black transgender and gender-non-conforming activists.

In contrast to calls to develop a “normative transgender prison order,” or trans-sensitive prisons (Edney 2004, 336–37), the participants point to

the systemic nature of gender violence as part of the structures of imprisonment, and reject the possibility of gender liberation under conditions of captivity. In so doing, they seek to transform anti-prison politics by calling for the abolition of gender policing as part of a broader abolitionist agenda. The following section explores the emotional costs of this radical positionality and examines the inner resources that many of the participants drew on to provide strength and resiliency in continuing the work.

Invoking the Ancestors: Spiritual Undercurrents in Anti-prison Work

Black women and transgender activists deal with personal traumas and family stresses arising from policing, criminalization, and incarceration while simultaneously confronting racist/sexist violence and gender policing. These multiple challenges constitute struggles that take place at a psychic and emotional as well as material level. In coping with the emotional toll of anti-prison work, many of the participants found strength, guidance, and solace through spiritual beliefs and practices. Following Jacqui Alexander's encouragement to "take the Sacred seriously," this research seeks to make visible the knowledge of "Sacred accompaniment" that informed the radical praxis documented here (Alexander 2005, 326–27). Anti-prison spaces are highly secularized, in part in reaction to race and class bias in early abolitionist and reform efforts based on religion. It is not surprising that none of the organizations that the participants worked with drew on religious principles. In contrast, prisons in the US and Canada are sites of both evangelist interventions and struggles over religious freedom by Muslims and indigenous people in particular, indicating the continuation of a centuries-old strategy to mold prisoners by shaping their souls and policing their relationships with the transcendent.²⁵ The role of religion in penal regimes mirrors its dualistic and contradictory role during slavery. The Bible's exhortation: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ" (Ephesians 6: 5–9) as well as the apparent justification of racial hierarchy gleaned through the story of Ham, provided the slave-owning class with a potent tool for mental colonization. At the same time, enslaved African Americans drew on both indigenous African religious practices and Old Testament stories for empowerment and liberation, finding inspiration from Moses defying "Ol' Pharaoh" and leading the slaves to freedom, or from Yoruba orishas clothed as Christian saints. Prison ministries also bring congregants an interpretation of religious teaching that erases any liberatory potential in favor of a focus on individual internal

transformation and accommodation to authority.²⁶ At the same time, the continued struggle for religious freedom within prisons indicates that many prisoners view religious practice as a powerful source of inspiration and inner strength. As Hamdiya Cooks, former Director of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, and a formerly incarcerated activist comments: “Inside you have to have something to sustain you and fight being treated like ‘things.’... My faith gave me the ability to fight, gave me the belief that I am a human being and have the right to be treated like one” (Cooks 2008). Taking a lead from imprisoned activists, this study seeks to illuminate the importance of spirituality in radical anti-prison praxis.

Six of the participants stated that spiritual beliefs played an important role in their lives, supporting their sense of self in the face of racist-sexist ideologies, lending them the strength and resiliency to keep doing insurgent work in the face of immense barriers, and guiding their activist work. Developing a personal relationship with a higher power gave Bakari the strength to give up crack cocaine and to find a calling in advocacy work with women in prison. Bakari draws our attention to the psychic brutality of the prison and the emotional strength required to continually to hear women’s stories of injustice, violence, and revictimization by the state:

Spirituality’s very important for me. Spirituality stopped me from using drugs.... It helps me get up at 4:45 to drive three hours away to deal with some messed-up COs [Correctional Officers] and hold the pain of other sisters that are still there. It helps me to do that. It helps me spend all my free time doing this work.... It fills me up.

Like Bakari, Trey called on Spirit as a source of strength, but he also saw this relationship as a source of wisdom and guidance: “I do believe in a Higher Power, I’m not going to say I don’t pray because I do. I’m not going to say I don’t ask my grandmother for guidance because I do.” Although Nathaniel was raised in Toronto, he spent summers with his grandparents in Memphis, Tennessee. There he absorbed southern black spiritual beliefs that later came to form a central but invisible foundation for his activist work, informing both his commitment to abolition and his organizing methods:

My grandparents...were famous for saying that if they wanted to pray or speak to anything spiritual they would go into the middle of the forest because that would be the most holy place that you could go to.

I believe that. In a way that's one of the underlying beliefs as to why I believe that prisons are so wrong is just the idea that you would take someone out a natural setting, remove them from things like airflow and natural light and the energy of other living beings and deprive them of that as part of their punishment is so wrong to me.

Nathaniel's spiritual beliefs also led him to pay attention to the connection among mind, body, and spirit in his organizing, making sure that nourishing food, emotional connection and support, regular breaks, and physical movement are a part of meetings and activist work. This approach mirrors the black traditional church, where worship is embodied in food, emotional expression and comfort, movement, and song.

While spirituality was important for many of the participants, none felt that organized religion met their spiritual needs. Instead, they felt that religious institutions were complicit in punitive systems of social control. Several of the participants rejected the mainstream Christian church because of its historical role in promoting white supremacy and its complicity in slavery and colonial violence. For Bakari, there was a clear continuity between the historical and contemporary role of the church in buttressing the ideological apparatus underpinning institutions of dominance:

The church is an institution that supported slavery, supported colonization. The history's all there but that's not what we're taught.... Religion tells you right and wrong, good and bad.... We're indoctrinated with that mentality that people are bad and they need to be punished. Christianity is a very punitive religion.

In response to racism in the mainstream church and homophobia and sexism in the black church, most of the participants turned inward to their own personal and individual relationships with Spirit. In contrast, Maya found a spiritual community in the Yoruba religion. Originating in what is now southwest Nigeria, Yoruba religious practices came to the Americas with African captives and blended with Christian practices to create syncretic Africanized religions. Contemporary African American communities have reconnected to Nigerian practitioners to re-engage with traditional Yoruba practices and to form transnational communities of practitioners that are closely linked to religious communities on the continent (Clarke 2004). Through her initiation to Oya, warrior goddess of the wind, Maya felt connected to the former prisoner and political exile Assata Shakur:

[T]he movie [*Eyes of the Rainbow*] was very powerful because it was very powerful to see this woman warrior both as Oya in the deity form and as a physical being in the Assata form. Defying horrific odds and fighting for justice and life and liberation.²⁷

As the tempestuous goddess of upheaval and change, Oya is often represented with a machete, cutting away the old to clear a way for new growth (Gleason 1992). By invoking Oya, Maya summons ancient wisdom and power in her work with the Hands Off Assata campaign, a campaign that poses a powerful grassroots challenge to the US government's power to punish and to the legitimacy of its imperial reach. Maya's initiation to Oya enables her to channel West African encounters with the Divine Feminine to counter the "horrific odds" faced by grassroots mobilizations against and within US empire. Countering Christian conservatism rooted in Eurocentric, masculinist conceptions of the Sacred, these African diasporic spiritual practices are also evident in Nathaniel's return to black folk traditions and in Trey's reliance on her grandmother's spirit for guidance. They introduce a metaphysical component to maroon abolitionism, connecting contemporary activism to the otherworldly sources of power invoked by their maroon antecedents.²⁸ Calling on the ancestors and the spirit world to enliven the struggle for social justice, they represent underground spiritual currents in the anti-prison movement.

Conclusion

The activists in this study are located at the intersections of systems of dominance. The politics and subjectivity arising from this location have long been the subject of black feminist interrogation. However, our investigations have assumed that only black female subjects or other women of color experience the epistemic privilege associated with the multiple jeopardy of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins 1990; King 1995; Sudbury 1998). In contrast, this research finds that other gender-oppressed activists who stand at the "nexus" of systems of dominance also use an integrated antiracist, antisexist, anticapitalist analysis as a basis for their work.²⁹

At the nexus of race, class, gender, and sexuality, black gender-oppressed activists bring to the anti-prison movement a unique vision of social justice based on lived experiences of racialized policing, surveillance, and imprisonment. These activists embody a tradition of marronage, the abolitionist praxis of ex-slaves and their families. In so doing, they reintroduce the Sacred as an element of anti-prison activism, indicating that

liberatory African diasporic spiritual practices play a more important role in contemporary struggles for social justice than has previously been understood. This article draws on the work of black transgender and gender-non-conforming activists in order to move anti-prison praxis beyond the gender binary. While feminist anti-prison researchers and activists have worked to make imprisoned women visible, we have tended to assume that women's prisons house only women, and that all women prisoners are in women's prisons. This research demonstrates that we were wrong on both counts; many of those labeled "women offenders" by the state refuse to conform to this label, and some of those identifying as women are housed in men's prisons. This double invisibility—to prison officials and to anti-prison practitioners—creates a location of multiple marginalization and vulnerability to violence, which is compounded by racial segregation and harassment. By engaging in non-reformist reforms, black gender-oppressed activists challenge prison regimes to engage the disruptive presence of prisoners' non-conforming body politics while simultaneously working toward the dismantling of penal structures. In so doing, they place gender justice at the center of black liberation struggles.

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NOTES

1. This article is dedicated to the memory of Boitumelo "Tumi" McCallum. Her spirit is a continued inspiration in the struggle against intimate and state violence. This article originally appeared as, "Maroon Abolitionists: Black Gender-oppressed Activists in the Anti-Prison Movement in the US and Canada," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*—Volume 9, Number 1, 2009, pp. 1–29 (reprinted with permission).

I use “gender-oppressed” as an umbrella term to refer to women and transgender and gender-non-conforming people. The term represents a paradigm shift from prior feminist analyses of patriarchal state and interpersonal violence that are rooted in a gender binary and that therefore focus only on women’s oppression. The concept is implicitly aspirational in that it both utilizes and seeks to generate a coalitional identity that might serve as a basis for solidarity.

2. I am indebted to the activists who gave generously of their time to make this research possible. As with all activist scholarship, this article is informed by the collective analysis, theorizing, and wisdom of numerous grassroots activists whom I have learned from over the years.
3. See for example, Sudbury 2002; 2003; 2005.
4. “Transgender” is an overarching term that refers to a range of people whose lived experiences do not fit the binary gender system. The term “gender-non-conforming,” in keeping with usage by the Audre Lorde Project, is used as an umbrella term that includes those who may not identify as transgender but who nevertheless experience policing, discrimination, or violence based on their non-conformist gender expression. I use “transgender and gender-non-conforming” as an inclusive term throughout this article. Where the term “transsexual” is used, this refers to a smaller group of individuals whose original biological sex is at odds with their sense of self, sometimes resulting in the choice to physically alter the body through hormones or surgery (Richard 2000).
5. Although there are many organizations and individuals who seek to reform the criminal justice system and improve prison conditions, this article focuses only on activists whose work aims ultimately to abolish prisons. Drawing on histories of resistance to slavery, these activists use the term “abolition” to indicate their goal of ending the use of imprisonment as a tool of social control and as a response to deep-rooted social inequalities.
6. I was a founding member of Critical Resistance, a national organization dedicated to dismantling the prison industrial complex, and have worked with and alongside Incite!: Women of Color against Violence, the Prison Activist Resource Center, Justice Now, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, National Network for Women in Prison, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Arizona Prison Moratorium Coalition, the Prisoner Justice Day Committee, and the Prisoner Justice Action Committee, Toronto. For the past decade I have been based in Oakland, CA and Toronto, Canada; these two sites critically inform my activist scholarly work. For an in-depth discussion of anti-prison scholar-activist methodology, see Sudbury 2009.
7. While “black” is often treated as a unitary and homogeneous racial category, my participants, while identifying as “black,” also embodied considerable ethnic and

- national diversity. Participants included those who had migrated to the US and Canada as children, as well as those born and raised in the two countries. Their parents were Bajan, Grenadian, Egyptian, Palestinian, African American, white English, and Italian.
8. They were involved with the following organizations: Infinity Lifers Liaison Group, the Prison Arts Foundation, PASAN, PJAC and the Prisoners' Justice Day Committee in Canada; Critical Resistance, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Audre Lorde Project, Prison Moratorium Project, the Trans/Gender Variant in Prison Committee of California Prison Focus, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, Justice Now, the Hands off Assata Campaign, Incite!: Women of Color against Violence, and All of Us or None in the US; Prisoners Rehabilitation and Welfare Action in Nigeria, and the International Conference on Penal Abolition.
 9. Attempts to write in ways that challenge the gender binary are complicated by our limited linguistic system. In particular, gender-non-conforming identities pose a challenge in the use of pronouns. It is extremely difficult to write an article without the use of "he" or "she." This being the case, I chose to ask participants how they preferred to be referred to. I have respected participants' requests regarding pronouns, for example, Bakari preferred s/he.
 10. In the 1980s, Alberto Melucci pointed to a shift from class-based struggles over economic resources, to "new social movements" that were constitutive of new collective identities related to struggles over peace, the environment, youth, gender, and racial justice (Melucci 1989; 1995). I am arguing here that these (arguably not so) new social movements can be conceptually divided between identity-based movements in which the actors define their collectivity with reference to a shared social location in relation to systems of oppression, and ideology-based movements that unite diverse actors through a shared critical analysis. I call the contemporary anti-prison movement an "ideology-based" (rather than an identity-based or issue-based) movement because, as I demonstrate in this article, participation in it is based on a common political analysis of the prison industrial complex and a shared ideological position that draws on histories of abolitionist struggle.
 11. The term "directly affected" is taken from activist spaces where it is used to highlight the importance of leadership and involvement by people from communities that have been targeted in the domestic wars allegedly against crime, drugs, and terror. This rubric makes visible the differential ways in which we are "all" affected by the prison industrial complex by distinguishing those who are indirectly affected, through the impact on state budgets for example, from those who have immediate and visceral experiences of gendered and racialized

- state violence.
12. In 1971, over 1,300 prisoners led by black and Puerto Rican insurgents seized control of Attica Correctional Facility in western New York state to protest racism, brutality, and appalling conditions. Forty-three people were killed when state officials ordered an armed response to the rebellion, bringing about international censure. Recordings and documents from the McKay hearings into the rebellion can be accessed at <http://www.talkinghistory.org/attica> (accessed January 6, 2009).
 13. See note 9.
 14. The Rockefeller Drug Laws, enacted in 1973 and still in force, were at the time the toughest drug laws in the country. The laws made the penalty for selling two ounces of narcotics a Class A felony punishable by fifteen years to life in prison. See <http://www.drugpolicy.org> (accessed January 6, 2009).
 15. For a discussion of the shift from welfare state to disciplinary state in the US and Canada, see Bohrman and Murakawa 2005; Neve and Pate 2005.
 16. Maya is referring to the \$1 million bounty placed on Black Panther Assata Shakur, aka Joanne Chesimard, by the US Department of Justice in May 2005. After being targeted as part of the FBI's campaign against the Black Panther Party, Shakur was found guilty by an all-white jury of killing a New Jersey state trooper, despite being incapacitated from gunshot wounds at the time of the alleged shooting. She escaped from prison in 1979 and has lived exile in Cuba since that time (Hinds 1987). For details of the current situation, see <http://www.handsoffassata.org/> (accessed January 6, 2009).
 17. Communities of escaped slaves and their descendants who fled via the underground railroad to settle in Ontario, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia after slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834 can also be seen as part of the maroon legacy.
 18. For example, the maroons of Jamaica waged war with the British for 140 years before finally being deported to Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1796 (Grant 1980, 15–16). Escapees in Ontario were also at risk from slave-catchers after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.
 19. Aboriginal people make up 2.8% of the Canadian population, but are 18% of the federal prison population. Correctional Service of Canada, "Aboriginal Community Development in Corrections: Aboriginal Offenders Overview." <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/abinit/know/7-eng.shtml> (accessed February 2, 2009).
 20. In the US, these rebel communities, often described as "outliers" [sic], were found in the Great Dismal Swamp on the Virginia and North Carolina border, in the coastal marshlands of South Carolina and Georgia, and among the Semi-

- noles in what was Spanish Florida (Lause 2002).
21. The work of Angela Y. Davis has been critical in envisioning this possibility (Davis 2003).
 22. Organizations working on these goals include the Trans/Gender Variant in Prison Committee, the Transgender, Gender Variant & Intersex Justice Project, Human Rights Watch's LGBT Rights Program, Lambda, and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project in the US and PASAN in Canada.
 23. The medical mistreatment of transgender prisoners is part of a continuum of medical neglect experienced by all prisoners. A paradigmatic case is *Shumate v. Wilson*, which found that endemic medical neglect in California state women's prisons constituted cruel and unusual punishment.
 24. This work has been taken up by the federal government in ways that suggest, erroneously, that by deploying more policing and punishment, the state can eliminate gender violence from an institution that is constitutive of that violence. The passage of the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003, which mandates enhanced monitoring of incidents of sexual assault and the application of "zero tolerance" policing within prisons, does little to eradicate the culture of domination and violence that promotes and condones sexual assault (Gaes and Goldberg 2004).
 25. Although indigenous prisoners' struggles to gain access to sweat-lodges and ceremonial objects have been the most visible in the fight for religious freedom in prison (Reed 2003), intensive battles were also waged for recognition of the Nation of Islam and black Muslim practices (Smith 1993; O'Connor and Pallone 2003, 96–97). The round-ups and mass detentions of Muslims in the war on terror (Cainkar and Sunaina 2005), as well as the targeting of Muslim prisoners as a potential security threat, have created new challenges for struggles for religious freedom in US and Canadian prisons and detention centers.
 26. Testimony from former prisoners at "Prison Ministry or Prison Abolition? An Interfaith Conversation on Prison-Industrial Complex Abolition," *Critical Resistance* 10, September 27, 2008.
 27. *The Eyes of the Rainbow*. 1997. Dir: Gloria Rolando. Havana, Cuba: Images of the Caribbean. Available at: <http://www.afrocbaweb.com/Rainbow.htm> (accessed October 18, 2008).
 28. An example of the metaphysics of maroon resistance is found in the case of Queen Nanny, eighteenth-century leader and obeah woman of the Windward Maroons in Jamaica. Queen Nanny was known to use "obeah" or supernatural powers derived from Ashanti spiritual practices against the British (Gottlieb 2000).
 29. See also Demmons 2007.

ABOLITIONIST IMAGININGS:

A Conversation with Bo Brown, Reina Gossett, and Dylan Rodríguez

Che Gossett

I am ever inspired and empowered by the visionary and community-centered work done by my sister Reina Gossett; ever impassioned by the intensity and sheer force of Dylan Rodríguez's abolitionist critiques; and ever oriented and grounded by Bo Brown's history and present of organizing with radical anti-prison and queer liberationist movements. At this critical juncture, this conversation offers a collective, cross-cutting dialogue about prison abolition and gender self-determination in this present era of mass incarceration and criminalization. Reina Gossett, Dylan Rodríguez, and Bo Brown have been organizing around, writing in resistance to, speaking out against and through suffering, loss, and hate violence that our communities are facing on a daily basis. This conversation highlights the ways that prison abolitionist activists and academics inform, challenge,

and help nurture and develop each other. It demonstrates not only the immediate urgency of abolition and trans liberation but also the relevance of histories of community resistance and resilience to our present struggle.

Che Gosset: How were you politicized around prison abolitionism?

Dylan Rodríguez: First, let me say how important it is that we situate our biographies of politicization within our specific political-historical contexts rather than as universalizing stories of “radicalization.” There is often a temptation to inhabit and perform radical political positions as if they were the inevitable result of traumatic and/or spectacular individual experiences with violence, oppression, and so forth. The fact is, we usually become radical political workers not simply because we have personal grievances with corrupt and unjust social systems, but rather because we encounter the mundane, insistent, nourishing, and contentious influences of some community of activists, teachers, survivors, and intellectuals (by which I mean people who think a lot, not just people who get paid to think and write). In this sense, I see my politicization toward prison, police, and penal abolition as a logical outcome of the people and political-intellectual traditions that I’ve been close to during the last two decades. There were two overlapping—really inseparable—dimensions to the process of both clarifying and (more importantly) *identifying with* an abolitionist analysis and political-intellectual position: participating in the formation of Critical Resistance as a (truly novice) activist and organizer produced an intimacy with a deep, historically specific sense of futility, urgency, and frequent desperation that I eventually realized is organic to the work of engaging liberationist and anti-racist work in a time of heightened—but no less *normalized*—warfare and institutionalized dehumanization. This is why I’ve spent most of my adult life trying to figure out how to conceptualize the prison and policing regimes, in their comprehensive social-institutional totality, as genocidal (or at least proto-genocidal) systems.

Let me put it this way: If our examination of the prison regime constantly leads us to the conclusion that particular populations, bodies, places, and communities are not meant to thrive or survive existing institutional arrangements, then what political practices can we conceive that directly deal with this condition *as a state of emergency*? This leads to the second major aspect of my politicization toward abolition, and that’s the sometimes undervalued *activist* work of focused study, research, and

analysis. Anybody who wants to contact me can ask me for my personal bibliography, and I'll be happy to send it—too many books, essays, articles, poems, and stories to name here. But let me expand on this dimension just a bit: Many of us, as activists, who are otherwise constantly thinking about and critically analyzing what we're doing, far too frequently ignore or abandon radical *intellectual* work as if it was an unaffordable luxury that's best taken up by academics, lawyers, and artists. I think this intellectual underdevelopment kills radical movements and empowers the liberal-to-conservative political circuitry that would like to see this condition of (proto-)genocide managed, reformed, and controlled rather than destroyed and transformed.

Bo Brown: I was a white working-class Butch; bar dyke on the weekends. Then I was a social prisoner due to a conviction for a less than \$50 theft from the post office where I was working. I was what we now call a social prisoner in prison for less than a year in a federal prison in San Pedro, California. I was in prison in September 1971 when George Jackson was killed. In fact, I was reading *Blood in My Eye*. I was still in prison when Attica happened, a month later. So that kind of slammed open my eyes to a lot of stuff. Even though I was pretty young—23—pretty inexperienced, pretty naïve, you know, didn't know a whole lot about the rest of the world. Even though I had no real political perspective or language, I knew that was some fucked up shit that went down. It was so wrong and really outright criminal. Murders were committed. Yet they got away with it right there in front of our eyes on TV for the whole world to see.

Reina Gossett: In my life, politicization happens as a deepening process, so it was years of fermentation rather than a single event that deepened my abolitionist politics. I found out about Critical Resistance New York City the spring after the RNC. This was a time when Bush had won re-election and abolitionists in New York City had been really engaged in organizing in response to militarization in NYC and the war in Iraq. I entered during a time of reflection, burnout, and inspiration. Because of gentrification in Brooklyn, the CR office moved from Crown Heights to the West Village. What I was witnessing were people throughout different activist spaces engaging abolition, even people deeply invested in reform work.

At that moment, along with other students, I was doing creative writing and poetry workshops at Island Academy—a high school for teenagers on the Rikers Island Jail. I had strong desires for a political home

to hold these experiences and make sense of them, to make my life intelligible to myself beyond the fear and shame I felt around my own trauma with the PIC.

The possibility of being involved in abolition presented a moment when traumatic experiences and shameful experiences could be transformed into the possibility of something more powerful: Yes, we have agency, yes, we are not innocent, and yes, there is something larger at work that causes ourselves and our loved to get caught up in prisons, jails, cop cars, detention centers, TSA private screenings, etc.

In that initial moment it felt like Critical Resistance NYC worked to create room for a lot of people. I felt inspired by so many queer people in a room working together and it made the Brecht Forum a space of political possibility; there were people doing childcare, and a lot of people from La Casita, the drug treatment program for women with children, came down from the South Bronx to be there. At that first meeting, people who had done a lot of work to create the space were leaving, which felt like the space didn't mandate that you stay, even if you were one of the co-creators.

Later, traveling to the Gullah Sea Islands and the Penn Center with CR deepened my connection to the spiritual/soulful aspects of this lineage of resistance and liberation. It was a powerful moment of entering a place that held such rich history of black resistance, resilience, loss, and joy. It also helped expand my understanding beyond a thinking process, meaning that the PIC doesn't just affect our material condition but also our spirits, psyches, and connection to land so any meaningful response and resistance has to be about more than our material condition.

This was all a decade after first reading George Jackson's *Blood in My Eye*, learning about Mumia, attending an Afro-centric summer and after-school program and developing a sense of wonder about my family's involvement in the black freedom movement, and many years after starting to visit my father while he was incarcerated in prison and psychiatric institutions. This makes me believe that coming into contact with the PIC or critical analysis was important, but entering a community of people committed to the process of abolition, which meant commitment to each other, was where transformation really occurred in my life.

The 2007 Transforming Justice Conference deepened and challenged my understanding of abolition politics. Many trans women, formerly incarcerated, were talking about their lives in the context of state violence and PIC abolition. Prior to that, I felt a real growing edge when it came to creating abolitionist spaces that trans people, but particularly

trans women of color, could access. It challenged me to make sure I was not leaving myself at the door when I entered abolitionist spaces. This reminded me of the legacy of trans people resisting state violence and whose stories have been suppressed both in and out of abolitionist movements. So for my own politicization process it wasn't just what caught my attention, but what held and challenged me, what grew my soul and sense of somebodiness. This means to me that politicization is a sacred moment—a sacred process—and throughout my life sacred spaces have held and increased those moments and processes.

CG: “PIC abolitionism” indexes so many apparatuses of state violence, surveillance, and policing, as well as modes of resistance, healing, and accountability. How do you make the concept politically intelligible and tangible through your own work?

DR: I'll spend anything from many minutes to many hours (depending on who I'm talking to and working with) illustrating how the formation of the prison and policing regimes are inseparable from the apparatuses of racial genocide on which the United States is based. How is the prison a paradigmatically anti-black genocidal institution? Where do we find the connections between policing and the land displacement, cultural genocide, and geographic incarceration of native and indigenous peoples in and beyond North America? What is the concept of “civil death” and how does it shape a society in which 2 million people are locked up by the state? What's the critical difference between an activism that addresses “police brutality” and one that addresses “police violence” or even domestic warfare? If we ask—and begin to answer—questions like this, we can demystify the prison's apparent normalcy and political invincibility, and build a *different set of historical and political assumptions* that recast our understanding of the prison regime as a focal point of a collective, radical political creativity—abolitionism—that takes seriously the monumental challenges of freedom, liberation, self-determination, and anti-violence.

I'll put it another way: If one is willing to commit to an unapologetic, rigorous analysis of what prisons are, where they come from, and what they do, in a way that respects and challenges the intellect and sensibilities of the person or people one is engaging, the abolitionist position makes more sense than not. This is not to say that we don't need to engage in simultaneous conversations about how to deal with repressive, oppressive, and exploitative forms of structural violence that would not simply

disappear with the abolition of the prison regime. Rather, it's to say that simply establishing the abolitionist concept as something that's grounded in a historical analysis and political logic results in *different sets of urgent questions* that no longer presume the existence of policing, imprisonment, or even the militarized nation-state itself.

BB: If you're about your politics, you know that all that shit comes out of the same asshole. It's all about who runs it, who profits from it: There's a medical industrial complex, a prison industrial complex, a business industrial complex—it's all about the wealthy getting wealthier. It's all connected. So you have to look at all that. I'm working toward a world in which we don't really need a prison industrial complex, a world that treats people like human beings, a world that doesn't create a War on Drugs, a world that doesn't destroy the education system and determines that the people who are somehow classified as “uneducable” or the wrong color or the wrong class will be tracked to prison, because there will be no jobs available to them, etc. A more equitable world, a more humane world, a world that's not about money—that's the primary thing—a world that's not about slavery.

RG: I've spent a lot of time wondering about how abolition is tangible in my work, and I have shifted in my practice in making abolitionist politics real. While I was involved with CR I put energy into creating a tangible abolitionist practice by challenging people to wonder if incarceration was a solution to violence by asking a lot of questions; the campaign to stop New York City from building a new jail in the South Bronx on a toxic land site, slated to be a women's jail with a nursery, fit really well into this.

Because we had been organizing to mobilize large-scale community opposition to the jail, we created a good moment to highlight how reforming and managing the prison industrial complex rather than abolition far too often leads to an expansion of state violence. In that case, the state used the fact that Rikers Island was (and is) in horrible condition and completely inaccessible for people to visit, as an excuse to build pristine new neighborhood jails so that communities could access their loved ones more easily in prison. So it became an important moment to engage the state and organize to stop this escalation of state violence.

After my involvement in the campaign and witnessing how often campaigns can make it hard for folks to not burn out, I moved into the place of wondering how to make abolition intelligible through a range of

daily practices. A lot of people were really trying to incorporate principles of prevention, intervention, reparation, and transformation into how we practiced our political work. It is not enough to just be urgent and in opposition to state violence but uncritically practice it through exclusion, alienation, sexism, ableism, transphobia, and homophobia and a racist politic of policing authenticity. Prefigurative politics really resonated with me, meaning I wanted the work I did to prefigure the world or communities I wanted to live in.

A lot of the bridge or transitional space between these two ways of practicing politics was held in spaces that were not actively organizing around state violence and domestic warfare, or at least not framing it the same way. Thought a lot about Southerners on New Ground's (SONG) framework of spirits, land, labor, and bodies being both sites of violence and colonialism as well as sites of beautiful places of resistance and healing, the prison industrial complex fits really well into that framework. This marked a real shift in my politics and signaled my movement into internal practices and away from campaigns, with an emphasis on slowing down the work.

CG: How have queer, genderqueer, trans, and gender-non-conforming PIC abolitionists organized internally to foreground gender liberationist and queer politics within the abolitionist movement? How might non-trans allies address cisgender supremacy within the abolitionist movement and help to center the politics of gender self-determination?

DR: These are two of several questions that are shaping and reshaping progressive-to-radical social movements generally, and abolition particularly. You've asked related questions here—one descriptive and one speculative—and both are reflective of present-tense conditions in the prison regime that focus on gender as a site for the invention and deployment of state violence. One of the most remarkable developments in the abolitionist struggle over the last decade or so has been the emergence of a radical queer analysis of state violence that pushes our understanding of how gender (and for that matter, sexuality) is not simply one discrete axis within intersecting logics of oppression and repression, but is actually a *technology through which the state creates new forms of systemic bodily vulnerability and disintegration*. So what do we make of the prison regime if it's constantly deforming and redefining its institutionalizations of "gender" over and against the actual gender identifications of its captives, officers, and administrators?

In this sense, I think we've seen the emergence of a queer, gender-queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming *intellectual and organizational leadership* in abolitionist collectives and other social movements, including and especially those collectives and movements that don't appear at first glance to be especially focused on "gender and sexual oppression" as their primary critical engagements. My sense of this development is that this community of activists is finely attuned to the ways in which their bodies and identities are acutely vulnerable to the comprehensive, oppressive violence of the state: from being subjected to abstract normative "definitions" of their allegedly deviant sexual and gender identities—a process that leads to both reactionary, state-condoned homophobic violence and self-harm, including suicide—to their increasingly evident vulnerability, to gender-specific forms of "racial" and "class" criminalization, as is the case with the state's targeting of sex workers, black and brown "gang"-classified youth, and undocumented migrants. This sensibility can and does translate into a dense, complex, and politically explosive *political* positioning that can and must be engaged by non-queer and non-trans people. This is why I'm always a bit suspicious of and hesitant to embrace the "allies" rubric—because if we really take the queer, trans, gender-non-conforming political *position* seriously, we have to understand that to undertake the work of gender self-determination and gender liberation, we don't simply "stand alongside/behind" our queer/trans peers; we inhabit a position *with* them in absolute political intimacy.

BB: Because they [queer, genderqueer, trans, and gender-non-conforming PIC abolitionists] do the work and they bring their issues. If you don't do the work then you don't get the say. I'm a working-class person, and I believe that the product belongs to the people who do the work—not the people who wrote the theory.

We [the George Jackson Brigade] were a very integrated group, especially for our time period; there were people in the underground at that time period who said that queers could not be revolutionary and would have to be dealt with after the revolution. We were just the opposite. We were lesbian, we were gay, we were bisexual; transsexual[ity] was not necessarily an issue at that time, the way that it is now. That's who we were and then we did the work. And we did a lot of work around prisons. One of the first bombings was the Department of Corrections in support of a prison struggle, in the maximum-security prison in the state of

Washington—Walla Walla. Later there was a long, forty-seven-day lock-down or a strike by prisoners in Walla Walla, and it was the longest strike in state history and actually it might be the longest strike in prison history that we know of where the prisoners were demanding better treatment: an end to torture, better food, basic things. The mainstream press had never talked to a prisoner; they only talked to the people in charge. We did some research and found that the mainstream press was owned by the same private utility company who had workers on strike; some of the same people who were on the prison board who were on this board and that board, and there was a financial connection, and we wrote that in a communiqué and said all this shit is connected, and the demand in the communiqué was that a prisoner be interviewed.

They [non-trans allies] have to do the work to understand that it's a civil rights issue. It's not about "I want to get married so I can be accepted by mainstream society"; it's about "I would like to live my life," "I would not like to be oppressed, suppressed, beat up, and spit on on the street, whatever the fuck you as the oppressor feels like doing to us." Because everybody's not the same in this world, nor should they be.

RG: The 2007 Transforming Justice Conference in San Francisco around gender self-determination was integral to PIC abolition. It was organized primarily by trans and gender-non-conforming women who had been incarcerated or otherwise survived the PIC. Because it was organized with an understanding of how organizing against transphobia and a commitment to gender liberation and self-determination are key components in creating real safety, it really concretized a new set of possibilities within the abolitionist movement. As opposed to some of the organizing with other abolitionist spaces, this conference already began with an understanding that trans and gender-non-conforming people's lives matter. That meant that the energy it so often takes trans people to convene in other abolitionist spaces where gender self-determination is held could be used for building relationships.

The Transforming Justice Alliance continued to grow this work during Critical Resistance 10 (CR10) through plenary speakers, workshops, and film. Last April, a contingent of Transforming Justice members met with the disability justice collective here in NYC. We're expanding our understanding around sites of incarceration and policing, made a decision to gather again in 2012 in Atlanta and do it in a way that prioritizes relationships, resilience, and strategizing.

During CR10, the Gender Liberation/Self-determination working group, which was part of the CR10 planning committee, struggled with how to have gender self-determination and trans histories and communities held in that space, and it was a constant negotiation. However, we successfully engaged all of the planning process and ensured gender liberation throughout the entire weekend: from childcare, to plenaries, as well as logistics like bathrooms access and pre-conference prioritizing outreach to trans and gender-non-conforming communities.

CG: In thinking about the legacy of trans activism against prisons and policing and the bio and necropolitical dimensions of incarceration—be they the regulation of gender expression and hormonal access, or the outing of HIV status and denial of care—what are ways in which the inside/outside struggle against the PIC has been shaped by trans and queer liberationist movements—especially by people of color?

DR: These movements have initiated a decisive altering of the ways in which we “do” and “think” political work against the PIC, aiming toward abolition. These critical interventions, in my experience, are spurred by major discursive, theoretical, analytical, and conceptual disruptions and transformations of formerly prevalent and heteronormative activist assumptions: For example, when we speak of “medical neglect,” “medical abuse,” or “lack of access to care,” we can no longer assume a normative, prototypical, male or female body as the object of racist and gender-oppressive state violence. Instead, we need to understand how it is often precisely when the prison medical and psychiatric apparatuses are “working well” that they are mobilizing some of their most fundamental violence against people’s already fragile sense of bodily integrity and emotional well-being. In other words, what trans and queer liberation politics teaches us is that there is really no such thing as a “good” or “humane” imprisonment regime within our historical conditions—there are only differing capacities and political/judicial tolerances of a range of physiological destructiveness against people held captive. So by focusing on the peculiar and acute ways that trans and queer people are *actually imprisoned*, we get a far deeper insight into the institutional logics of the prison in its deadly totality.

BB: Well, you have to go back to Stonewall: Wasn’t that about queer and trans people in a bar in the Village, in New York? And then you have Ku-

wasi Balagoon, a black liberation army member. It took people a long time to time to be able to say that, and now they can say that he was a black gay man and that he was a revolutionary. Of course he did his part in that part of the struggle and in his community and remained who he was, true to himself. And I think that the formation of TIP in San Francisco—Trans In Prison—and those kinds of organizations that are specific, that work within the context of the broader prison industrial complex, are essential.

RG: I think this question requires deep reflection on the real importance of trans history within anti-authoritarian and abolitionist spaces and how these trans legacies are passed on to people or not and held or not within the larger left/activist world.

Too often, in abolitionist movements, we imagine that trans lives have just started to exist, that there is no legacy of trans people engaging abolition. We often do not know or retell how trans people organized around state violence and the PIC, like the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries organizing against police violence alongside the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. We forget that, until recently, organizing led by trans people was in resistance to violence from the police. We fail to remember that in the year following Stonewall, the first gay march in New York City ended—on purpose—at the Women’s House of Detention, which held Panther 21 members Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur. We hardly like to share that trans activists like Sylvia Rivera and whole communities of trans women were kicked out of burgeoning gay and lesbian movements, feminist movements, and anti-authoritarian movements in order to consolidate power, make the movement more attractive to institutional power, and win minor concessions from the state. Least of all, we do not talk about how this violent exiling of trans women from radical spaces continues to happen to this day.

If we ignore the way this legacy and history of trans and gender-non-conforming people being pushed out of and marginalized within abolitionist movements shapes current trans and gender-non-conforming struggles, then we’re only getting part of the story and are perpetuating historical exile and isolation; we are perpetuating violence.

That said, I don’t believe it is enough to nostalgically and uncritically call upon STAR, the leadership of trans people during the Stonewall Rebellion or the Compton’s Cafeteria Riot, each time we talk about trans people resisting the PIC. When recalling STAR and trans leadership in the anti-state violence movement, we often don’t have enough understanding

of the social history to name not only the amazing accomplishments but equally important the moments in which more growth and development was needed: What compromises should not have been made? What ethics could have been better foregrounded? This tendency makes our history less dimensional and more flattened, and ultimately diminishes our ability to make connections and see political patterns.

Right now I am grieving the exile of our political lineage and lives from abolitionist spaces; I am longing for my history and struggling to piece it together. As a black trans woman who is queer and an abolitionist, I want to know more about how trans people have supported or rejected abolitionism and gender self-determination within a range of political movements. More than any compiling of organizations or individual activist names within a general abolitionist history, I want a fuller scope of our social history that extends beyond when we were simply only oppressed or acted incredibly exceptional. I really believe in order for this to happen we have to challenge the hierarchy of intelligible abolitionist history that keeps our stories as trans and gender-non-conforming people from ever surfacing in the first place. Rather than simply reclaiming our lineage, let's start to change the context.

Trans people and trans resistance against the PIC have existed for a very long time, and our movements deserve a more complex understanding of the way we have shaped these movements. Reproductive justice work—particularly done by and on behalf of incarcerated trans and gender-non-conforming people and supported by trans people on the outside—is an exciting piece of work I want to hold.

Gabriel Arkles, formerly a staff attorney at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, gave a brilliant talk at Critical Resistance 10 on reproductive justice and trans people in providing a real framework to challenge the eugenicist underpinnings of the PIC. Gabriel reminded the abolitionist audience that trans people's access to different treatments or interventions like hormones and surgery are real and legitimate medical needs—most of which do not permanently end our ability to physically reproduce—and not getting them can damage trans people's health and ability to function in the world. Gabriel then goes on to name six ways that prisons act as forces of reproductive injustice and carry out eugenicist practices. These include:

- Isolation from partners: “Simply locking up huge numbers of trans people during the years when they could be having children,”

- Isolation from families: “Keeping trans people away from raising their children when they are incarcerated and have their convictions used against them in custody and visitation cases; abuse, neglect, and termination of parental rights cases; and in adoption proceedings,”
- Conditioning safety on trans people giving up their ability to have children: “The only way that trans people are put into facilities that match their gender is by having a type of surgery that may or may not be right for them, that is nearly impossible to get, and results in sterilization,”
- Denying medical care: “Denials are not only profoundly damaging the physical and mental health of trans people in prisons and robbing them of the ability to make intimate decisions about their own bodies and to self-determine their own gender, but they can also lead to loss of reproductive capacity in another way,”
- Keeping incarcerated people from having children together: “Explicitly a part of the agenda of prison officials to make sure that trans women and non-trans women in prisons, who are mostly women of color and disproportionately disabled, cannot have children together, and to make sure that trans men and non-trans men in prisons, who are mostly men of color and disproportionately disabled, cannot have children together,”
- “The final way that the prison industrial complex interferes with the ability of trans people to have children and limits the population of trans people is by literally killing trans people.”

Trans and queer liberationist movements expand and transform the conversation around incarceration and reproductive justice and deeply impact the struggle against the PIC. Trans and queer liberationist movements continue to push reproductive justice spaces to remember that there are women who are incarcerated in men’s prisons and that reproductive justice conversations need to expand to center trans women and gender-non-conforming people.

CG: What are ways in which the abolitionist movement needs to change and adapt in order to address current realities facing incarcerated and ICE-detained trans and gender-non-conforming people, especially women and people of color?

DR: To begin, I would largely defer on this question to people who are much more deeply enmeshed in the political and intellectual work around the specificity of these conditions of imprisonment. I think I still have a lot to learn from the experiences and analyses being generated by people who are closely and rigorously engaging this form of state violence, and perhaps this is the best way to respond to the question you've posed. I don't know that the thing we're naming as the abolitionist movement has calcified to the point that it has developed a truly parochial, common set of political paradigms and protocols—at least, not in its current rendition as a late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century radicalism (one could say there were at least two predominant, contradictory understandings of “abolition” during the middle-to-late part of the nineteenth century, as it was taken up by white abolitionists and enslaved and non-enslaved black abolitionists).

I'm not saying that there aren't some persistent assumptions guiding this emerging movement that reproduce oppressive racial, gender, sexual, and class logics; rather, what I'm getting at is that the field of abolitionist politics and discourses is contingent, fragile, and flexible enough at this moment that it may not be a question of whether it needs to “change and adapt” to accommodate the material and historical truths of imprisoned/detained trans and gender-non-conforming people. Instead, the issue may be one of whether and how *multiple abolitionisms* can articulate with each other in a way that poses a legitimate threat to transform the current condition. What we'd be talking about is a conception of political struggle that visualizes the abolition/transformation of various, specific, perhaps non-comparable forms of imprisonment that are sometimes lumped together within the same institutional designation: “prison.” It may be the case that we can't and shouldn't attempt to compare (or conflate) the sometimes drastically different forms of policing and imprisonment targeting different bodies and populations, and instead engage them as relatively specific, but structurally connected forms of state violence. This, I think, might give the work of abolition a rich set of political tools as well as organizing strategies. With all respect to my colleagues who've spent much time and energy constructing them, I don't think there can be such a thing as a *singular* or *definitive* “abolitionist mission statement.” We need many of them, and each needs to rigorously understand what its mission is attempting to engage.

BB: One thing that I think the prison movement doesn't have is a lot of information about this group. People need to make the information

available; once people know the facts, I think it's pretty self-explanatory. That's what I think could happen with this in this age of computers, is that Web sites that are about prison abolition should be linked or somebody needs to be coming up with numbers and concepts and stories—like what is happening. I don't see that stuff too much on the Web. [At] Prison Activist Resource Center (PARC), where I do my prison abolitionist work, we have a resource directory and we have a pretty large LGBT section that goes in to prisoners, about somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 of those a year go in to prisoners, and based on the replies that we get back, prisoners tell us on average they share this with fifteen other prisoners. We're trying to solicit their stories and we're trying to create a blog page where we can excerpt stories from prisoners letters and put that up, so people out here in the free world can understand, because they cannot understand, because they don't know. If you want to support prisoners, you don't take over the movement; you encourage prisoners to create their own movement and you support that movement. You can't run that from out here, but you have to make a way available to them for them to have a voice, and you can do support work on a daily basis just like you do all your other support work. You live your politics by supporting your work and making a way for others to support their own.

RG: (A lot of the information in this answer can be found in the Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative publication *A Fabulous Attitude*, which I co-authored.) Last spring, NYC-based members of Transforming Justice, including the Audre Lorde Project, Queers for Economic Justice, and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project met with two members of the Disability Justice Collective, Mia Mingus and Sebastian Margaret, to talk about the overlapping ways that ableism, poverty, transphobia, and racism construct the prison industrial complex. We talked a lot about expanding our understanding of places of incarceration to include psych hospitals, group homes, and homeless shelters, but also we talked about how we can intentionally do abolitionist work in a way that centers the disabled people within Transforming Justice and our communities. The conversation really depended on our commitment to disability justice as an abolitionist process, not just a principle that we hold.

According to the US Census, 54.4 million people in the US live with disabilities, and a recent study by the Center for Economic and Poverty Research found that half of adults who experience poverty are disabled. This is something that the Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative found

when asking our community members about their experiences with poverty and disability. We also found that a substantial number of low-income queer and trans people dealt with police violence because of the NYPD's ableist racism and homophobia/transphobia. We weren't surprised when we learned that the percentage of people who named they dealt with police violence because of policing of disability was the same as the percentage of people who said they dealt with police violence because of policing of sex work. Of course, we also understood that it wasn't just disability or sex work that the police were regulating, but also that the folks who were disabled or sex workers were most often low-income, homeless, and people of color who were queer and trans.

The experiences of shame and isolation when navigating police violence are central issues for trans and gender-non-conforming people, especially people who are people of color, immigrants, low-income, and disabled. When we asked people how they navigate, 71 percent of people said they rely only on themselves when dealing with immigration issues; nearly half said they rely only on themselves when dealing with legal issues.

If we want to create an abolitionist movement that faces the realities of people navigating the prison industrial complex, then we must create strategies to generate safety and connection. So many low-income trans and gender-non-conforming people in New York City are not leaving their homes or their shelters as a proactive way of navigating transphobia and other forms of violence. If we're trying to build a grassroots movement that encompasses all of us, we need to make sure shame and isolation are challenged and incorporated into our organizing. Of course we are also not victims; we are fighting back and navigating state violence all the time, and trans people are doing incredible work around the shame and isolation that the prison industrial complex creates. When the Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative asked our community, low-income queer and trans people, how we healed from discrimination and violence, 114 community members answered: We tell others what happened (54 percent); we write in journals (40 percent); we have fun (35 percent); we exercise (30 percent); we meditate (31 percent); we make art (25 percent); and we pray (58 percent).

CG: How might the abolitionist movement speak to the demands and needs of categories of labor excluded from mainstream union politics such as sex work and incarcerated work? How do these labor politics fit into configurations of class struggle by low-income LGBTQ communities of

color fighting campaigns for economic justice in both the neoliberal city and rural areas?

DR: This is crucial and difficult work because it has to address an intense confluence of unions' internal political hegemonies, late-neoliberal capital's repression and disposal of entire categories of workers, and the particular forms of criminalization reserved for laborers who are already presumed to be destined for some form of early death or imprisonment: Here I'm thinking of prison labor, undocumented workers, sex workers, and young (urban and rural) black and brown people whose only access to a real income is through the underground economy. So, there has to be an alternative to mainstream union politics, since the structural conditions confronting these kinds of "workers" are quite literally not legible to a conventional union membership or agenda. In other words, when you're focusing on workers who are not only fighting for basic economic survival (what we often call "economic justice"), but are simultaneously engaging the systemic violence of criminalization and policing, as well as the spectrum of institutionalized violence formed around the disciplining and enforcement of normative genders and sexualities, you are transcending and really obliterating the parameters of a "union politics." So I have no programmatic thoughts for how abolitionist struggles might adequately address this state of crisis, but I do think that an immediate step would be to develop a more multilayered, dynamic, and complex understanding of what "criminalization" is, how it works, when and where it's mobilized, why its technologies change and don't change, and so forth. To adequately comprehend the sites of struggle your question lays out is to build an understanding of how the technologies of criminalization not only lead to people being policed and locked up, but also lead to the most hyper-vulnerable workers being excluded or marginalized from entire categories of political advocacy. Criminalization is a violence of the social imagination that constantly creates the prison and policing regime, and works to eliminate certain people from the realm of "legitimate" politics. Abolitionism is uniquely positioned to illuminate and expound on this.

BB: You have to do the work, you have to put the information out there, you have to form a group that builds respect in the movement by being there, and then you have to demand a voice. We're queers, we know, we have to take a space for ourselves, that's the only way we'll ever get any

space. And we can't just go "fuck that" and walk away. It's a process; we have work to do to earn it, we have to do it based on our politics. The thing you learn in prison is everybody's a number, anybody can say anything, but not everybody can do anything; anybody can talk the talk but not everybody walks the walk, and if we want people to pay attention to us and take us seriously, we have to walk the walk. We have to do work and then we have a right to demand, and we should be strong in those demands. And we all know that organized queers have never been known to be the quiet ones.

RG: When the Welfare Warrior Research Collaborative, a research and activist group made up of low-income queer and trans people, mostly of color, interviewed our community about interactions with the police, the people who identified as trans and the people who identified as currently homeless had the highest rate of interactions with the police. Of seven people who identified as sex workers, five of people had been strip-searched more than once. Nine people reported policing targeting based on gender expression, five of these nine people said they had been strip-searched more than once. Thirty people reported that police stereotype and target them based on sexual identity, and of these thirty people, fourteen said they have been strip-searched at least once.

As Angela Davis explains, the abolitionist movement and radical feminist movements must understand strip searches performed by police and prison guards as a form of sexual violence, "if uniforms are replaced with civilian clothes—the guards and the prisoners—then the act of strip searching would look exactly like the sexual violence that is experienced by the prisoner who is ordered to remove her clothing, stoop and spread her buttocks."

Some imagine that if you stretch the politics of large unions to include everyone, all "workers," then that will garner the greatest amount of protection for people. Some might imagine that this would protect queer and trans folks who consistently navigate this kind of sexual violence from the police. Personally, I have great doubt that mainstream union politics will ever expand enough to encompass the priorities of low-income trans people within informal and underground economies, as well as the quite formalized system of incarcerated labor. Abolition is relevant for people excluded from unions and union politics because people and communities are already taking care of and protecting themselves. For people who are doing work that is criminalized, an abolitionist politic supports

relevant questions such as *How do we protect ourselves, each other, and practice justice without getting the state involved?*

CG: What kinds of political alternatives does the abolitionist movement offer in the face of current prevailing “post-racial” and neoliberal ideology?

DR: I can speak in a very incomplete way to what abolitionism *can* offer in terms of a radical racial, anti-racist politics. In my interpretation of it, the logic of an abolitionist position is that it is a direct and radical historical confrontation with the living legacies of anti-black racial slavery, racial colonialism, white supremacist nation-building, as they’ve differently converged in a nation-building project. So one of the most compelling political alternatives abolition can offer is a *pedagogical commitment* to learning and teaching how these systems are central to our everyday, historical present. The fraudulence of a “post-racial” (or even “post-racist”) society is not hard to show—you can just go to the US government’s own socioeconomic and criminal justice data to demystify the bullshit—but what’s far more difficult is building a *racially/anti-racist politics* that is about liberation rather than reform and the abolition of genocide rather than genocide management.

BB: We are not post-racial; we have racism that occurs every fucking day. I think they should not be fooled by the hype: Who owns the media? It’s not people of color. I would say the media takes this and that and says this movement [Obama’s election] means we’re past race; this in itself is a new chapter of racism. It’s a way of saying, we don’t have to worry about that anymore, even though we know that racism occurs every day in our lives and all around us. Don’t be fooled by the bullshit. They’ll [the big money that owns media] take any opportunity, they pay people millions of dollars to figure out how to talk to us and convince us that things are different than how they are. If racism had ended, there wouldn’t be more than two million, gazillion, however many people of in prison; 60 to 70 percent of them are people of color. Who gets jobs? Who has the highest unemployment rates? All the numbers are there: We are not past racism. It took us 500 and however many years to get us where we are; it’s not gonna change in a day or in one election. We made a step maybe, which they’ll try and take away from us as soon as they can. But I mean what the fuck is the Tea Party about? It’s not about “tea”; it ain’t about “trans,” either.

RG: We are neither post-racial nor post-racism. I think that abolitionist movements center and respond to the incredible amount of racist state violence and warfare that people every day have to navigate, and make clear links between the prison industrial complex and chattel slavery, colonialism, white supremacy, and anti-black racism. But it is unclear how an abolition movement operates as a political alternative beyond holding up the lie of post-racial ideology and promoting a politic, like Dylan said, “that is about liberation rather than reform, and the abolition of genocide rather than genocide management.”

TOOLS/RESOURCES

Critical Resistance's Introduction to the Prison Industrial Complex

Picturing the PIC Exercise

WHAT YOU NEED:

For Part 1: Flip chart/Big Paper

For Part 2: Concentric Circles drawn on big paper minus the list of PIC element terms, terms sticky notes, blank sticky notes, copies of CR LA Concentric Circles Handout (see below for more)

WHAT YOU DO:

This section of the workshop has two parts: 1) a PIC brainstorm, and 2) the PIC Concentric Circles.

Part 1: PIC shout out

Set up: Have a piece of big paper up, and some markers. Shout out any and all parts of the prison industrial complex that you can think of.

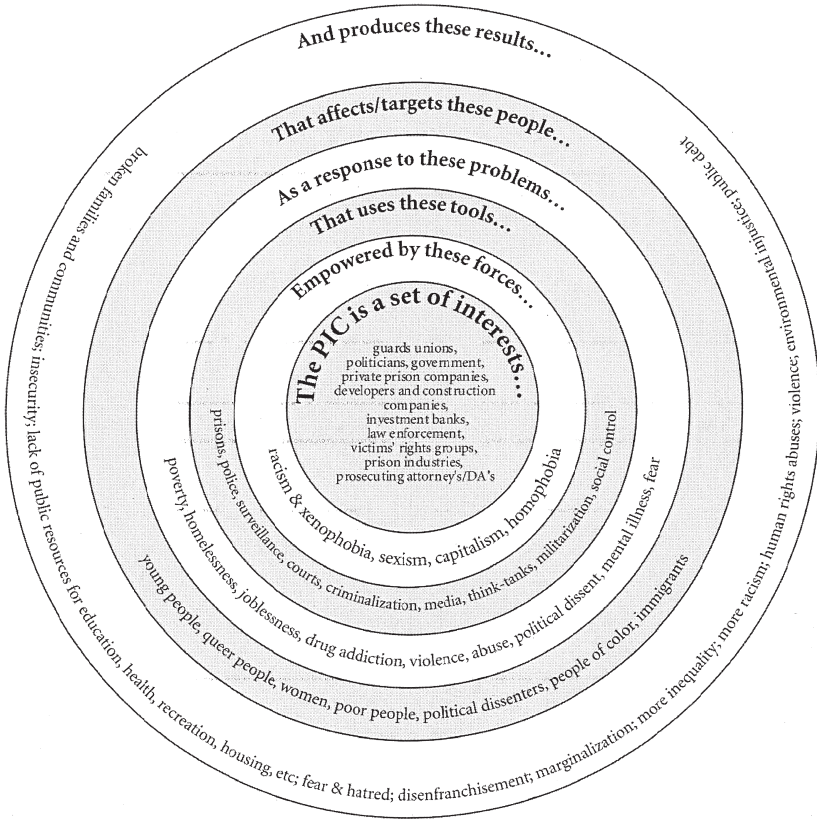
How it works:

1. As you shout out parts of the PIC, write them up on the big paper. Be specific, and don't use language that empowers the PIC (i.e. don't use crime, use harm instead; don't use criminal/inmate, use people in prison instead. For CR's Thoughts on Language, go to their website.
2. After about **10 minutes**, end the brainstorm and take a look at the board. What connections do you see?

Make sure there is a good range of parts of the PIC up. It should cover policing, imprisonment, and surveillance, for example. It should have structures (**white supremacy, patriarchy**), and institutions (**courts, corporate media**) and interests (**investment banks, politicians**).

Part 2: Concentric Circles

It can also be helpful to look at all these parts of the PIC in a more systematic way. To do that, CR's LA chapter developed the following concentric circle exercise.



What Goes in Which Circle?

It is helpful to have (at least) one way to rephrase what each circle is about. Some ways to talk about them are:

- **“The PIC is a set of interests”** means “Who benefits from the PIC?”
- **“Underpinned by these systems of oppression”** means “What systems of power create and are supported by imprisonment, policing and surveillance?”
- **“That uses these tools”** means “How does the PIC keep itself going?”
- **“As a response to these problems”** means both the real harms we face as well as the problems people who use the PIC say it addresses.
- **“That affects/targets these people”** means “Who gets caught up by the PIC?”
- **“And produces these results”** means “What happens when we rely on imprisonment, policing, and surveillance as solutions to social, political, and economic problems?”

Source: Critical Resistance

Set up: **Prepare Beforehand and Bring:** Draw the concentric circles on big paper without the lists of PIC element terms (but with the sentence fragments). Create sticky notes that have those terms listed, one term per sticky note.

How it works:

1. The Concentric circles are a model used to assist in defining the PIC by filling in the blanks of a fragmented defining sentence.
2. Read through the fragments of the sentence aloud: (“The PIC is a set of interests...empowered by these forces...”).
3. Participants should come up to the circles, one at a time, pick an element of the PIC sticky note, place it where it belongs in the circle, and explain to the group why that is so. Start with the inner circle first and work your way out, placing 2–3 sticky notes in each circle.
4. After each sticky note is placed and explained, comment on the choice of item, find out what questions there are, and see if anyone else has something brief to add.
5. After the outer-most circle is filled in, each participant should either write a new element of the PIC on a blank sticky note and place it, and/or move a sticky note from one concentric circle to another, explaining how it fits in both (or more) circles.
6. Distribute the filled in CR LA Concentric Circle Handout.

POLITICAL POINTS:

Some points you might want to think about:

- Both the brainstorm and the circles show the same thing in different ways. The brainstorm might be a better way to see how much is part of the PIC, or to search for new connections between elements of the PIC. The circles help us highlight how elements of the PIC do particular kinds of work to keep the PIC moving and growing.
- The circles show really well that the PIC is not broken—in many

ways, the interests at the center are more powerful than ever, and the results at the end are being produced more abundantly than ever

- Where are PIC reformers and abolitionists? When picturing the PIC, it might be useful to point out our place(s) in it.
- Of the three words in the phrase “PIC,” “Complex” might be the most important—these models show that the PIC is broad, deep, and intertwined within itself.
- The PIC encompasses our entire society—is there anything that can’t be related to punishment, imprisonment, policing, or surveillance?

Critical Resistance's Introduction to PIC Abolition

Questions for Abolitionist Work: 7 Easy Steps

WHAT MATERIALS YOU NEED:

Handout: 7 Easy Steps

WHAT YOU DO:

This section has one part: going through the “7 Easy Steps” document and discussing how you can use it to evaluate your work and plan new projects, and to use this section as an opportunity to think about how specific parts of your current work tie into one or more of these steps

Set Up: Pass around the 7 Easy Steps handout.

How It Works:

This is basically a talking piece—which means it's really important to check for understanding and draw out questions from the participants.

There are a number of points to hit:

1. 7 Easy Steps comes from Critical Resistance's Abolitionist Toolkit, and was designed to be a way for people to think through how a wide variety of projects can fit into an abolitionist practice and vision. The first part of the handout has the steps broken down really basically and the second has the same steps but with a little more detail added.
2. Read through each step and then take a minute to talk through what it means, offer an example from your work or that of other work happening, and ask for questions.
3. Use the following main political points to shape your reading and thinking about the handout.

Step 1: Life and Scope

It's really important to emphasize that we don't think abolition includes anything that makes the PIC reach further into our lives, or hang onto power longer. Campaigns to make prison more livable are an example here. A campaign that supports the building of newer cells to deal with crowding is not abolitionist, while campaigns to release the people who

will fill those cells, or a campaign to decriminalize activities are (see Step 4 to ensure you are not pitting said group of activities against another). Use the third exercise to think of other examples.

Step 2: Where are you working?

It's important to emphasize here that we try to build leadership development work into our project and campaigns, not make it something separate. It's also good to mention here that we try to go after big, central parts of the PIC, not "low hanging fruit."

Step 3: Coalitions

You can't win this fight on your own. Build stronger relationships with your allies and start new relationships, in every phase of your work.

Step 4: No to NIMBY

NIMBY means "Not In My Back Yard." It's really easy to look out for NIMBY-ism in terms of prison and jail construction—making sure you aren't saying "don't build a jail here, build it there." But NIMBY also applies to the rest of the PIC. Abolition can't win if we pit groups of prisoners ("women" vs. "men," or "nonviolent" vs. "violent") against each other. We can make specific claims to eliminate specific parts of the PIC without implying that other parts are ok to let stand.

Step 5: Healthy solutions?

We have to create an active, dynamic balance between tearing down the things we don't want, and building up the things we do.

Step 6: Whose words are you using?

We all need to help each other learn new ways of talking about the world, whether it's saying "people in prison" instead of "criminals," or "inmates," or working openly to combat white supremacy, sexism, or gender violence in how we talk to each other. Building a new language takes time, but is essential to building the new world we want to live in, and it can bring to light and work to counteract the manipulative ways in which the PIC

defines itself and/or co-opts the words we use.

Step 7: Short-to-Long-Term

Everything Critical Resistance does today is a short-term step to abolish the PIC, but it is also all connected to a long-term vision and strategy. It's really important that you practice laying out what those connections are, and explaining them so that people who participate in one event or project can see the connection between that and a long-term struggle for abolition.

POLITICAL POINTS:

- **Analytical work is work.** We need to constantly be evaluating if our work is getting us closer to our goal, or if we've been thrown off track. It's especially important for people new to organizing to ask questions about how the work they are doing fits into an abolitionist practice, and not assume that because an element of the PIC is being challenged that it is abolitionist work.
- **Lots of different work can be abolitionist.** There's a huge variety of work that can help abolish the PIC. The point of the tools is not to limit or restrict the type of work we take on, but to guide you in thinking really seriously and creatively about what you can do.

SEVEN EASY STEPS

IDEAS & QUESTIONS FOR
EVERYDAY ABOLITIONIST ORGANIZING

WHEN WE USE ABOLITION AS AN ORGANIZING TOOL, it can be confusing how exactly to support abolition on a day-to-day level, especially when we work in coalition with people who aren't sold on abolition (yet). These are some guidelines, questions, and ideas to think about as you plan and evaluate your campaigns.

1. LIFE AND SCOPE

THE CRITICAL RESISTANCE MISSION STATEMENT SAYS "Because we seek to abolish the PIC, we cannot support any work that extends its life or scope."

What we mean by not "extending the life" is that the work doesn't try to make the PIC less harmful, or to fix it, but to make it less possible for the PIC to continue.

What we mean by not "extending the scope," is that any work we take up doesn't support cages that aren't clearly prisons (like mental hospitals or prison hospices) instead of prisons; it doesn't make it easier to feed people into prisons (by putting cops in schools, for example); and it doesn't validate any part of the PIC. So even when we interact with state

agencies like courts or legislatures, it's done strategically and in a way that weakens those systems, not by appealing to them as potential sources of justice.

2. WHERE ARE YOU WORKING?

We organize in different ways and places, and we have to use different levers of power to undo the PIC. And while we have to work in as many ways and places as possible, we need to give the most emphasis, presence, and support to fighting the most harmful aspects of the PIC—especially within our groups. This can mean things like insisting on leadership from people of color, challenging heterosexism within your group, or highlighting white supremacy in your literature. It can also mean taking the time to work through how a campaign will connect the communities doing the campaign to the communities being targeted, and thinking about how fighting a specific part of the PIC can make the whole system weaker.

EXAMPLE It can be hard to tell when you're using state agencies strategically and when your appeal to a court or legislature confirms its power. For example, pressuring state legislatures to decrease funding for state corrections departments during budget crunches is a useful way to challenge PIC expansion. However, it's important to make clear that (most) legislators do support prisons and police, and that opposing the PIC isn't just a matter of balanced state budgets, and that while we might be able to force legislatures to support our work sometimes, it is always going to be a matter of political force (instead of a matter of faith in democracy or the idealism of a representative). Otherwise you might find yourself in some tricky situations (in one instance, activists in California pushing for cuts to the corrections budget recently were told that if they wanted to see a decrease in funding they should support cuts to prisoner education and job training programs). Sometimes you can work against this just by saying it: telling the media and people you're working with that a campaign is appealing to such-and-such state power strategically—not because you have faith in the government—can go a long way toward changing how people inside and outside your campaign understand that work.

3. COALITIONS

As abolitionists, figuring out whom to work with might seem hard when not very many identify as abolitionist. At the same time, abolitionist politics helps you see broad connections throughout the PIC, making coalitions more necessary and more exciting. But in coalition work it can be especially hard to sort out the “life and scope” questions. Some things to think about are:

- Is the coalition’s work abolitionist even if the members aren’t?
- How do you relate to the non-abolitionists in your coalition? How are you working to shift their goals from reform to abolition?
- Who’s indirectly involved in your coalition? Who funds the groups you’re working with? What other coalitions are those groups in?

4. NO TO NIMBY

Not-In-My-BackYard (NIMBY) organizing tries to prevent something harmful from happening in one community by directly or indirectly suggesting it should happen somewhere else (someone else’s backyard). A good example would be a group that organizes against a prison proposed for their community not by saying the prison shouldn’t be built, but that it needs to be built in another place. NIMBY campaigns are sometimes easier to “win,” because the project can still be completed, so all it really does is move the problem temporarily out of sight. Effective abolitionist work means saying “no” to the PIC anywhere and everywhere.

5. HEALTHY SOLUTIONS?

Part of building toward abolition is building other institutions and practices to maintain and create self-determination for communities and individuals. This doesn’t mean that every campaign against a part of the PIC has to offer an exact alternative, but we should be thinking about those things—if you’re fighting a new prison, what do you want done with that money and land instead? If you’re fighting

against education and health care cuts, where from state funding of the PIC could you get money (e.g. replacing cuts to education with cuts to the prison or police budget).

6. WHOSE WORDS ARE YOU USING?

What are the ways you frame the problem, your work, your demands, and your solutions? Do they rely on the PIC’s categories of criminals, fear, and punishment, or do they help us to build a world where we are accountable to each other and address harm by providing for our collective and individual needs? Does your language help broaden people’s general vision of fighting the PIC, or does it only spotlight a particular problem?

7. SHORT- TO LONG-TERM

How does your current project contribute to abolition? Does it offer immediate support to people harmed by the PIC? Is it a movement-building or educational tool? Does it connect issues that seem separate? What is it going to make possible down the line?

I think that as we develop prison abolitionism, we also need to build on the visions of communities that have organized around the basis of identity. By that I’m not saying that we need to go back to this narrow identity politics where we can’t work together unless we come from the same racial group, or sexual group or whatever, but I do think that sometimes the prison abolitionist language begins to erase the language of race and identity and sexuality, and to a lesser extent gender. And if we do that, then it becomes less—it doesn’t seem so relevant to communities of color that are very much used to organizing within a framework of anti-racist, African-American, Latino language. So I think that we need to develop an abolitionism and an abolitionist statement and vision that is totally infused with the cultures of the peoples who are incarcerated.

JULIA SUDBURY

SUPPORTING ABOLITION A QUICK GUIDE TO THE QUESTIONS

Here's a shorter version of our questions about supporting abolition. They aren't intended as a checklist, but rather as a quick guide to some of the questions we think it's most useful to ask. They're things to think about as your work develops to make it stronger, not an entrance test for the abolition club.

|LIFE AND SCOPE|

DOES YOUR WORK SEEK TO MAKE THE PIC A LESS WORKABLE SOLUTION TO PROBLEMS, AND TO LIMIT ITS REACH OVER OUR LIVES?

|WHERE ARE YOU WORKING?|

DOES YOUR WORK TAKE ON ASPECTS OF THE PIC THAT ARE MOST HARMFUL? DO YOU WORK TO FIGHT FORMS OF HARM LIKE WHITE SUPREMACY, HETEROSEXISM AND CLASS PREJUDICE BOTH IN YOUR CAMPAIGNS AND WITHIN YOUR GROUP?

|COALITIONS|

ARE YOU WORKING IN COALITIONS WITH ABOLITIONIST GOALS?
ARE YOU WORKING TO HELP OTHER COALITION MEMBERS UNDERSTAND ABOLITION?

|NO TO NIMBY|

DOES YOUR WORK REJECT THE PIC EVERYWHERE?

|HEALTHY SOLUTIONS|

DOES YOUR WORK SUGGEST WORKABLE WAYS TO MAINTAIN SELF-DETERMINATION, MEANINGFUL SAFETY, AND COLLECTIVE HEALTH?

|WHOSE WORDS ARE YOU USING?|

DOES THE LANGUAGE YOU USE CHALLENGE COMMONLY ACCEPTED NOTIONS OF SAFETY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND JUSTICE?

|SHORT- TO LONG-TERM|

DOES YOUR IMMEDIATE WORK MAKE FUTURE CHALLENGES TO THE PIC POSSIBLE?

Addressing the Prison Industrial Complex: Case Studies

The following is a list of campaigns, policies and changes both past and present that address the prison industrial complex.

Review a few, discuss the results and ask the following questions:

- In what ways has this change hurt our communities and/or made the prison industrial complex stronger?
- In what ways has this change supported our communities and/or made the prison industrial complex weaker?
- Is it possible to have achieved the stated goal without hurting our communities? If so, what does this mean about the strategy of abolition?
- Any lessons learned from efforts to “fix” versus efforts to weaken/eliminate the prison industrial complex?

Goal: End domestic violence

Strategy: Create more/harsher sentences for people who abuse others

Result: Has domestic violence decreased and/or ended?

Goal: End returns to imprisonment (recidivism) by people with substance dependencies

Strategy: Legislation that forces treatment instead of imprisonment

Result: Has recidivism decreased and/or ended?

Goal: End violence against lgbtqq (queer) communities

Strategy: Hate crime legislation that gives harsher sentences for people who have caused harm against those communities

Result: Has this violence decreased and/or ended?

Goal: End returns to prison (recidivism) due to the poverty of joblessness

Strategy: “Ban the Box” campaigns that eliminate the question on city and county job applications that asks if the applicant has been convicted of a felony.

Result: Are/Will more former prisoners (be) able to apply and get jobs?

Goal: Provide safe space for transgender people in prison

Strategy: Send all transgender prisoners to a transgender only prison

Result: Did this happen/is this happening and are transgender people in prison safer now?

Goal: Decrease individual to individual (interpersonal) violence

Strategy: Increase public police presence

Result: Has violence in our neighborhoods, families, communities decreased?

Captive Genders

Goal: Bring people in women's prisons home to be with their families

Strategy: Create more, smaller prisons located in more places

Result: Will this bring people in women's prisons home?

Goal: End violence against youth in prison in Louisiana

Strategy: Shut down the Tallulah Youth Prison

Result: The prison was closed. Did violence in this prison stop?

Goal: Decrease the number of people in prison

Strategy: "Compassionate Release" which allows for the release of terminally ill prisoners.

Result: Does this decrease the number of people in prison?

Goal: End abuses by prison officials who determine at will sentence length

Strategy: Introduce mandatory sentencing minimums for specific charges

Result: Are people in prison facing shorter sentences? Are individuals able to get shorter sentences based on individual circumstance surrounding charges with mandatory minimums?

Goal: Support people in prison who have survived violence, including sexual violence, harassment and other abuses

Strategy: Use administrative segregation as protective custody

Result: Are survivors of violence safer, cared for and/or supported and is trauma addressed in protective custody?

Goal: End imprisonment violence against youth in prison in California

Strategy: Build multiple, smaller facilities throughout the state

Result: Is there/will there be less imprisonment of youth, and is there/will there be less violence generally against youth who are locked up?

Goal: End abuses against marginalized people (people of color, transpeople, queer people) by police and prison staff

Strategy: Mandatory sensitivity trainings, already done for most of California's police force.

Result: Has/will harassment, abuse and violence against these communities by staff and police decrease(d)?

Goal: End medical neglect and crowding in prisons

Strategy: Build more prisons

Result: Has this ended medical neglect and crowding?

Can you think of more? How about ending the death penalty and replacing it with life in prison, or decreasing recidivism (see above) by decreasing parole and probation time or decreasing violence by creating curfews or fighting police violence by convicting individual police officers?

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