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WE DO THIS 'TIL WE FREE US

ABOLITIONIST ORGANIZING AND TRANSFORMING JUSTICE

Mariame Kaba

Foreword by Naomi Murakawa

Edited by Tamara K. Nopper

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So You're Thinking about Becoming an Abolitionist

LEVEL, October 2020

Today, more people are discussing and contemplating prison abolition than ever before. Decades of collective organizing have brought us to this moment: some are newly aware that prisons, policing, and the criminal punishment system in general are racist, oppressive, and ineffective.

However, some might be wondering, "Is abolition too drastic? Can we really get rid of prisons and policing all together?" The short answer: We can. We must. We are.

Prison-industrial complex abolition is a political vision, a structural analysis of oppression, and a practical organizing strategy. While some people might think of abolition as primarily a negative project—"Let's tear everything down tomorrow and hope for the best"—PIC abolition is a vision of a restructured society in a world where we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more things that are foundational to our personal and community safety.

Every vision is also a map. As freedom fighter Kwame Ture taught us, "When you see people call themselves revolutionary always talking about destroying, destroying, destroying but never talking about building or creating, they're not revolutionary. They do not understand the first thing about revolution. It's creating." PIC abolition is a positive project that focuses, in part, on building a society where it is possible to address harm without relying on structural forms of oppression or the violent systems that increase it.

Some people may ask, "Does this mean that I can never call the cops if my life is in serious danger?" Abolition does not center that

question. Instead, abolition challenges us to ask "Why do we have no other well-resourced options?" and pushes us to creatively consider how we can grow, build, and try other avenues to reduce harm. Repeated attempts to improve the sole option offered by the state, despite how consistently corrupt and injurious it has proven itself, will neither reduce nor address the harm that actually required the call. We need more and effective options for the greatest number of people.

Let's begin our abolitionist journey not with the question "What do we have now, and how can we make it better?" Instead, let's ask, "What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?" If we do that, then boundless possibilities of a more just world await us.

An abolitionist journey ignites other questions capable of meaningful and transformative pathways: What work do prisons and policing actually do? Most people assume that incarceration helps to reduce violence and crime, thinking, "The criminal punishment system might be racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and unfair, but it at least keeps me safe from violence and crime."

Facts and history tell a different story: Increasing rates of incarceration have a minimal impact on crime rates. Research and common sense suggest that economic precarity is correlated with higher crime rates. Moreover, crime and harm are not synonymous. All that is criminalized isn't harmful, and all harm isn't necessarily criminalized. For example, wage theft by employers isn't generally criminalized, but it is definitely harmful.

Even if the criminal punishment system were free of racism, classism, sexism, and other isms, it would not be capable of effectively addressing harm. For example, if we want to reduce (or end) sexual and gendered violence, putting a few perpetrators in prison does little to stop the many other perpetrators. It does nothing to change a culture that makes this harm imaginable, to hold the individual perpetrator accountable, to support their transformation, or to meet the needs of the survivors.

A transformative justice movement led by Black, Indigenous, and people of color survivors has emerged in the past two decades to offer a different vision for ending violence and transforming our communities.

A world without harm isn't possible and isn't what an abolitionist vision purports to achieve. Rather, abolitionist politics and practice

contend that disposing of people by locking them away in jails and prisons does nothing significant to prevent, reduce, or transform harm in the aggregate. It rarely, if ever, encourages people to take accountability for their actions. Instead, our adversarial court system discourages people from ever acknowledging, let alone taking responsibility for, the harm they have caused. At the same time, it allows us to avoid our own responsibilities to hold each other accountable, instead delegating it to a third party—one that has been built to hide away social and political failures. An abolitionist imagination takes us along a different path than if we try to simply replace the PIC with similar structures.

None of us has all of the answers, or we would have ended oppression already. But if we keep building the world we want, trying new things, and learning from our mistakes, new possibilities emerge.

Here's how to begin.

First, when we set about trying to transform society, we must remember that we ourselves will also need to transform. Our imagination of what a different world can be is limited. We are deeply entangled in the very systems we are organizing to change. White supremacy, misogyny, ableism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia exist everywhere. We have all so thoroughly internalized these logics of oppression that if oppression were to end tomorrow, we would be likely to reproduce previous structures. Being intentionally in relation to one another, a part of a collective, helps to not only imagine new worlds, but also to imagine ourselves differently. Join some of the many organizations, faith groups, and ad hoc collectives that are working to learn and unlearn, for example, what it feels like to actually be safe or those that are naming and challenging white supremacy and racial capitalism.

Second, we must imagine and experiment with new collective structures that enable us to take more principled action, such as embracing collective responsibility to resolve conflicts. We can learn lessons from revolutionary movements, like Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra), that have noted that when we create social structures that are less hierarchical and more transparent, we reduce violence and harms.

Third, we must simultaneously engage in strategies that reduce contact between people and the criminal legal system. Abolitionists

regularly engage in organizing campaigns and mutual aid efforts that move us closer to our goals. We must remember that the goal is not to create a gentler prison and policing system because, as I have noted, a gentler prison and policing system cannot adequately address harm. Instead, we want to divest from these systems as we create the world in which we want to live.

Fourth, as scholar and activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes, building a different world requires that we not only change how we address harm but also that we change everything. The PIC is linked in its logics and operation with all other systems—from how students are pushed out of schools when they don't perform as expected to how people with disabilities are excluded from our communities and the ways in which workers are treated as expendable in our capitalist system.

Changing everything might sound daunting, but it also means there are many places to start, infinite opportunities to collaborate, and endless imaginative interventions and experiments to create. Let's begin our abolitionist journey not with the question "What do we have now, and how can we make it better?" Instead, let's ask, "What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?" If we do that, then boundless possibilities of a more just world await us.

The System Isn't Broken

The New Inquiry, June 2015

"Ms. K, they got me again."

Six words set up the familiar routine. A car ride to the station. An unwanted and unwelcome conversation with the officer at the desk. Rudeness, contempt, and that awful perma-smirk. Waiting in anticipation; false alarms. A reprieve: an escape without ransom. More waiting. Finally, the bowed head and slumped shoulders of a young Black man walking toward me. No tears. Where are the tears? Another court date or maybe not. Another record to expunge, always. Then it starts all over again.

I dread summer. It's the season of hypersurveillance and even more aggressive policing of young people of color in my neighborhood.

The urban summer criminalization merry-go-round—a kind of demented child's play. Quotidian terrorism in the service of law and order. Low-intensity police riots against young Black people. My anecdotal observations are supported by empirical data. The ACLU of Illinois says that last summer, based on population, Chicago police made "far more street stops than New York City police did at the height of their use of stop-and-frisk. The CPD stopped more than 250,000 innocent people." Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of those stops involved Black people who, while making up 32 percent of Chicago's population, were 72 percent of the stops.

Some studies suggest a correlation between summer and a rise in "crime." I can hear the justifications: "If crime increases in the summer, then more police aggression is justified." This fails to take into account that "routine" interactions between police and young people in my community are fraught all year long. Summer exacerbates these oppressive contacts, because many more young people are out of school and usually without jobs, hanging out in public spaces.

Public spaces in urban and suburban towns are contested. Residents collude with law enforcement to police and enforce boundaries. Young people of color are criminalized not only by the police but also by community members.

Yesterday yet another video went viral on social media. It depicts police officers in McKinney, Texas, swarming a pool party filled with teenagers, and one particular officer manhandling a fourteen-year-old Black girl wearing a bikini. The young people are cursed at, have a gun pointed at them, and are taunted for being afraid of the cops. Fifteen-year-old Miles Jai Thomas explains what happened:

> "So, a cop grabbed her arm and flipped her to the ground after she and him were arguing about him cursing at us," Thomas said.
>
> When two teens went toward the cop to help the girl, they were accused of sneaking up on the cop to attack.
>
> "So, a cop yelled 'get those motherfuckers' and they chased [us] with guns out. That's why in the video I started running," Thomas said.
>
> "I was scared because all I could think was, 'Don't shoot me,'" he said.

Watching the video, I was struck by how the young people were denied the right to be afraid. Their fear was illegitimate. And it makes sense; only human beings are allowed to be afraid. For the cops, these youth of color (mostly Black) are not human.

I dread summer.

I attended a conference recently about youth–police interactions. The familiar trope about the need for young people and the cops to get to know each other was bandied about, useless pablum offered as a solution for ending police violence, which relies on a faulty definition of the problem. As a young person once told me: "I know the cops here very well, and they know me. We know each other too well. That's not the problem. The problem is that they harass me daily. If they'd stop that, we'd be fine."

The young people in my community who come into contact with the police can recite their names and badge numbers. Those are unforgettable to them; the stuff of their nightmares. It's unclear to me how more conversations will change the dynamics of such oppression. For most of the public, whether liberal or conservative, it's the cops' job to arrest people, and they are incentivized to do that work. Presumably,

then, what would need to change to shift the dynamics are the job descriptions and the incentives.

A persistent and seemingly endemic feature of US society is the conflation of Blackness and criminality. William Patterson, a well-known Black communist, wrote in 1970, "A false brand of criminality is constantly stamped on the brow of Black youth by the courts and systematically kept there creating the fiction that blacks are a criminally minded people." He added that "the lies against blacks are propped up ideologically." I would suggest that they are also maintained and enforced through force and violence.

When Baltimore police dressed in riot gear turned their violence on high school students at the Mondawmin Mall a few weeks ago, some people were horrified. "These are children," onlookers exclaimed on social media. I thought grimly of how the cops would see the situation. There are no children here; only targets and threats. Social science research suggests that cops see Black children as older and as less innocent than their white peers. The research confirms what most of us already know—Black children are considered to be disposable and dangerous mini-adults.

This is not new. I came across the story of thirteen-year-old Beverly Lee when I read the 1951 "We Charge Genocide" petition many years ago. Lee was shot in the back by a Detroit police officer on October 12, 1947. Here's the item that piqued my interest as it appeared in "We Charge Genocide":

> Beverly Lee, 13-year-old youth, was shot to death by Policeman Louis Begin of Detroit, Michigan. Mrs. Francis Vonbatten of 1839 Pine testified that she saw Lee and another walking down the street, and saw the squad car approach. She heard, "Stop, you little so-and-so," and then a shot. The officer was subsequently cleared by Coroner Lloyd K. Babcock.

I was particularly interested in the incident because I thought that Beverly was a girl, and police violence cases involving Black girls and young women have been overlooked. In fact, I haven't found any historical incidents of police violence against Black women and girls that led to mass mobilization. Current campaigns, such as #SayHerName, point to the enduring erasure of state violence against Black girls and women.

The incident in McKinney, Texas, featured physical violence against a Black girl, underscoring the fact that girls (cis and trans) are consistently at risk of law enforcement abuse. On further research, I learned that Beverly Lee was actually a boy. On the day after Beverly Lee was shot, the *Detroit News* reported on the incident:

> Shot in the back as he tried to evade arrest, a seventh-grade schoolboy was killed by a Detroit patrolman late Sunday. The boy, Beverly Lee, 13, of 2637 Twelfth Street, was shot by Patrolman Louis Begin, of the Trumbull station, when he disregarded orders to halt. Begin and his partner, Patrolman William Owens, were called to Temple and Vermont avenues where Mrs. Mabel Gee, 1930 Temple, reported her purse stolen. Approaching the intersection, they saw Lee, ordered him to halt, and Owens fired a warning shot. Begin shot him as he continued to run away from the scout car. A watch belonging to Mrs. Gee and $18, the amount she said was in her purse, were found in the boy's pockets. The purse was recovered nearby. Begin and Owens made statements to William D. Brusstar, assistant prosecutor. They said Mrs. Gee referred to her assailant as a *man* and, when they encountered him, they thought he was an adult [emphasis mine]. Lee was about five feet, six inches tall. Other victims of recent purse snatchings were being invited to view the body at the County Morgue. Lee attended Condon Intermediate School. His body was identified by his mother, Mrs. Leah Lee.

The discrepancy between these two accounts is unsurprising. As we have so often seen, there is usually a variance between initial press reports and official police accounts and community narratives. Notice that the cops and the alleged robbery victim said that they thought Lee was an adult. The adultification of Black children has long and deep roots that date back to chattel slavery. In fact, before the Civil War, half of all enslaved people were under sixteen years old. Enslaved children were property and were expected to work; children as young as six years old worked the fields.

Beverly Lee was the third Black boy killed by police that year in Detroit. Community members were furious and organized protests over Lee's killing. Despite the uproar, only eight days after the shooting, the prosecutor closed the investigation into Lee's death, calling it "justifiable

homicide." The Detroit NAACP met with the prosecutor and called for an inquest into the facts to the case. They presented him with signed statements of witnesses contradicting his findings. It appears that the community, led by the NAACP, continued to organize around Lee's case without success; charges were not brought against Officer Begin. Police impunity has a long history in this country. In the end, a thirteen-year-old Black boy was shot in the back by police and died. To quote Ossie Davis, Black people understand that "we live with death and it is ours."

Most often, it's police shootings and killings that spark urban uprisings. However, the daily indignities and more invisible harms are ever-present and are the foundation of hostilities between young people of color and police. Routine state violence carried out by the police happens outside of public view, under the guise of addressing gun and other forms of violence. If past is prologue, my community can look forward to another summer of intense, relentless, and surely illegal police harassment of young people of color, and specifically of young Black men.

Young people riding their bikes on sidewalks, instead of being ticketed as prescribed by law, will be hauled into police lockups. They'll be accused of resisting arrest and then funneled into Cook County Jail. Teenagers leaving summer programming will be followed by cop cars, and asked where they are heading. One cross word will lead to being roughly thrown on car hoods in front of the whole neighborhood. Walking through alleys as shortcuts to head home from work, young people will be hounded, provoked, and dragged to the station. But not before being beaten in the car, without any concern for health conditions like seizures. Trans and gender nonconforming youth will be bullied and verbally harassed for walking down the street. Young people will be picked up without cause and driven into rival gang territory to be dumped without wallets or phones—only to hear the cops announce for all to hear that they belong to the rival gang. Young women walking down the street minding their own business will be sexually harassed by those sworn to "protect and serve."

I dread summer.

Besides stop-and-frisks and other violations, young people in my community are also subjected to warrantless searches of their homes.

One young person I know narrated his experience in the 2014 *We Charge Genocide* report to the United Nations Committee against Torture:

> We're sitting in a house playing video games, and we hear a banging on the door. Before we know it, the door is kicked down and there's five special-ops officers with their huge M16s drawn, pointed at us—three 15-year-olds playing video games. And they tell us get on the ground. They say if we move, they are gonna kill us; "Don't look at me, we'll fucking kill you in a second!" Pointing their guns at us. Then they don't find anything. They let us all go, they laugh, try to joke with us, apologize, then leave out. And we're sitting there like, "What just happened?" They tear up the house. They stole money.

Lest you think that this is an innovation of zero-tolerance militarized policing born out of the war on drugs, here's an example from eighty years ago. When the people of Harlem rioted in 1935, it was once again an incident of police violence that lit the fuse. A rumor that Lino Rivera, a sixteen-year-old Black Puerto Rican young man, was killed by New York City Police led to nearly four thousand Harlemites taking to the streets. Seven hundred police officers were dispatched to the community. When all was said and done, three people had died, and more than $200 million in damages were sustained from the riot. In the aftermath, Mayor LaGuardia commissioned a report to understand the causes of the uprising. In a section titled "The Police in Harlem," the report's authors maintained that cops routinely entered the homes of Black Harlemites "without a warrant and searched them at will." Instead of drugs, Harlem cops in the 1930s were searching for policy slips in efforts to crack down on illegal gambling. Reprinted in the report was a letter by a Harlem resident addressed to the mayor. Below are a few excerpts:

> On Tuesday morning, April 16, 1935, between 10 and 11 o'clock, the superintendent of the house rapped at my door. Upon opening it, I was confronted with three men (men in civilian clothes) who the superintendent said were policemen. He explained that the men were searching the house, for what he did not know.
>
> The men entered the room, and proceeded to search without showing shields or search warrant. I asked twice of two of the men what was the reason for such action. I received no answer from any of them.

> My dresser drawers were thoroughly gone into, dresser cover even being raised. My bed came in for similar search, covers were dragged off and mattress overturned. Suitcase under my bed was brought up and searched. My overcoat hanging on the door was gone over and into. My china closet was opened and glassware examined. After this startling act the men left my room, still without saying a word.

These types of violations span centuries for Black people and are one reason for racial disconnects in discussions about privacy and civil liberties. Black people have always been under the gaze of the state, and we know that our rights are routinely violable. Civil liberties and individual rights have different meanings for different groups of people. They also have different priorities, depending on social contexts. A review of Black history suggests that considerations of civil liberties are always embedded within concepts of equality and social justice. In other words, by design or necessity, Black people have focused on our collective rights over our individual liberties. This makes sense in a society where we don't just assume individual Black guilt and suspicion; we are all guilty and we are all suspicious (even if we may want to deny this reality). In that context, individual liberties and rights take a back seat to a collective struggle for emancipation and freedom. Additionally, as a people, we have always known that it is impossible for us to exercise our individual rights within a context of more generalized social, economic, and political oppression.

History offers evidence of the intractability of the problem of police violence. What should we do then? Quite simply, we must end the police. The hegemony of police is so complete that we often can't begin to imagine a world without the institution. We are too reliant on the police. In fact, the police increase their legitimacy through all of the non-police-related work that they assume, including doing wellness and mental health checks. Why should armed people be deployed to do the work of community members and social workers? Why have we become so comfortable with ceding so much power to the police? Any discussion of reform must begin with the following questions: how will we decrease the numbers of police, and how will we defund the institution?

On the way to abolition, we can take a number of intermediate steps to shrink the police force and to restructure our relationships with each other. These include:

1) Organizing for dramatic decreases of police budgets and redirecting those funds to other social goods (defunding the police).
2) Ending cash bail.
3) Overturning police bills of rights.
4) Abolishing police unions.
5) Crowding out the police in our communities.
6) Disarming the police.
7) Creating abolitionist messages that penetrate the public consciousness to disrupt the idea that cops = safety.
8) Building community-based interventions that address harms without relying on police.
9) Evaluating any reforms based on these criteria.
10) Thinking through the end of the police and imagining alternatives.

Importantly, we must reject all talk about policing and the overall criminal punishment system being "broken" or "not working." By rhetorically constructing the criminal punishment system as "broken," reform is reaffirmed and abolition is painted as unrealistic and unworkable. Those of us who maintain that reform is actually impossible within the current context are positioned as unreasonable and naive. Ideological formations often operate invisibly to delineate and define what is acceptable discourse. Challenges to dominant ideological formations about "justice" are met with anger, ridicule, or are simply ignored. This is in the service of those who benefit from the current system and works to enforce white supremacy and anti-Blackness. The losers under this injustice system are the young people I know and love.

I really dread summer . . .

Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police

The New York Times, June 2020

Congressional Democrats want to make it easier to identify and prosecute police misconduct; Joe Biden wants to give police departments $300 million. But efforts to solve police violence through liberal reforms like these have failed for nearly a century.

Enough. We can't reform the police. The only way to diminish police violence is to reduce contact between the public and the police.

There is not a single era in United States history in which the police were not a force of violence against Black people. Policing in the South emerged from the slave patrols in the 1700s and 1800s that caught and returned runaway slaves. In the North, the first municipal police departments in the mid-1800s helped quash labor strikes and riots against the rich. Everywhere, police have suppressed marginalized populations to protect the status quo.

So, when you see a police officer pressing his knee into a Black man's neck until he dies, that's the logical result of policing in America. When a police officer brutalizes a Black person, he is doing what he sees as his job. Now two weeks of nationwide protests have led some to call for defunding the police, while others argue that doing so would make us less safe.

The first thing to point out is that police officers don't do what you think they do. They spend most of their time responding to noise complaints, issuing parking and traffic citations, and dealing with other noncriminal issues. We've been taught to think they "catch the bad guys; they chase the bank robbers; they find the serial killers," said Alex Vitale, the coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College, in an interview with *Jacobin*. But this is "a big myth," he said. "The vast majority of police officers make one felony arrest a year. If they make two, they're cop of the month."

We can't simply change their job descriptions to focus on the worst of the worst criminals. That's not what they are set up to do. Second, a safe world is not one in which the police keep Black and other marginalized people in check through threats of arrest, incarceration, violence, and death.

I've been advocating the abolition of the police for years. Regardless of your view on police power—whether you want to get rid of the police or simply to make them less violent—here's an immediate demand we can all make: cut the number of police in half and cut their budget in half. Fewer police officers equals fewer opportunities for them to brutalize and kill people. The idea is gaining traction in Minneapolis, Dallas, Los Angeles, and other cities.

History is instructive, not because it offers us a blueprint for how to act in the present, but because it can help us ask better questions for the future.

The Lexow Committee undertook the first major investigation into police misconduct in New York City in 1894. At the time, the most common complaint against the police was about "clubbing"—"the routine bludgeoning of citizens by patrolmen armed with nightsticks or Blackjacks," as the historian Marilynn Johnson has written.

The Wickersham Commission, convened to study the criminal justice system and examine the problem of Prohibition enforcement, offered a scathing indictment in 1931, including evidence of brutal interrogation strategies. It put the blame on a lack of professionalism among the police.

After the 1967 urban uprisings, the Kerner Commission found that "police actions were 'final' incidents before the outbreak of violence in 12 of the 24 surveyed disorders." Its report listed a now-familiar set of recommendations, like working to build "community support for law enforcement" and reviewing police operations "in the ghetto, to ensure proper conduct by police officers."

These commissions didn't stop the violence; they just served as a kind of counterinsurgent function each time police violence led to protests. Calls for similar reforms were trotted out in response to the brutal police beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the rebellion that followed, and again after the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner.

The Obama administration's *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* resulted in procedural tweaks like implicit-bias training, police-community listening sessions, slight alterations of use-of-force policies, and systems to identify potentially problematic officers early on.

But even a member of the task force, Tracey Meares, noted in 2017, "Policing as we know it must be abolished before it can be transformed."

The philosophy undergirding these reforms is that more rules will mean less violence. But police officers break rules all the time. Look what has happened over the past few weeks—police officers slashing tires, shoving old men on camera, and arresting and injuring journalists and protesters. These officers are not worried about repercussions any more than Daniel Pantaleo, the former New York City police officer whose chokehold led to Eric Garner's death; he waved to a camera filming the incident. He knew that the police union would back him up, and he was right. He stayed on the job for five more years.

Minneapolis had instituted many of these "best practices" but failed to remove Derek Chauvin from the force despite seventeen misconduct complaints over nearly two decades, culminating in the entire world watching as he knelt on George Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes. Why on earth would we think the same reforms would work now? We need to change our demands. The surest way of reducing police violence is to reduce the power of the police, by cutting budgets and the number of officers.

But don't get me wrong. We are not abandoning our communities to violence. We don't want to just close police departments. We want to make them obsolete.

We should redirect the billions that now go to police departments toward providing health care, housing, education, and good jobs. If we did this, there would be less need for the police in the first place.

We can build other ways of responding to harms in our society. Trained community care workers could do mental-health checks if someone needs help. Towns could use restorative justice models instead of throwing people in prison.

What about rape? The current approach hasn't ended it. In fact, most rapists never see the inside of a courtroom. Two-thirds of people

who experience sexual violence never report it to anyone. Those who file police reports are often dissatisfied with the response. Additionally, police officers themselves commit sexual assault alarmingly often. A study in 2010 found that sexual misconduct was the second most frequently reported form of police misconduct. In 2015, the *Buffalo News* found that an officer was caught for sexual misconduct every five days.

When people, especially white people, consider a world without the police, they envision a society as violent as our current one, merely without law enforcement—and they shudder. As a society, we have been so indoctrinated with the idea that we solve problems by policing and caging people that many cannot imagine anything other than prisons and the police as solutions to violence and harm.

People like me who want to abolish prisons and police, however, have a vision of a different society, built on cooperation instead of individualism, on mutual aid instead of self-preservation. What would the country look like if it had billions of extra dollars to spend on housing, food, and education for all? This change in society wouldn't happen immediately, but the protests show that many people are ready to embrace a different vision of safety and justice.

When the streets calm and people suggest once again that we hire more Black police officers or create more civilian review boards, I hope that we remember all the times those efforts have failed.

A Jailbreak of the Imagination: Seeing Prisons for What They Are and Demanding Transformation

with Kelly Hayes

Truthout, May 2018

Our current historical moment demands a radical reimagining of how we address various harms. The levers of power are currently in the hands of an administration that is openly hostile to the most marginalized in our society (Black people, Native people, the poor, LGBTQ people, immigrant communities, and more). While we protect ourselves from their consistent and regular blows, we must also fight for a vision of the world we want to inhabit.

For us, that's a world where people like Tiffany Rusher, who began a five-year sentence at Logan Correctional Center in Broadwell Township, Illinois, in 2013, are not tortured to death in the name of "safety." Our vision insists on the abolition of the prison-industrial complex as a critical pillar of the creation of a new society.

Imprisoned on charges related to sex work, Tiffany Rusher was eventually placed in solitary confinement for getting into a physical struggle with one of her cellmates. During her time in solitary confinement, Rusher's mental health began to deteriorate, initiating a cycle of self-harm. After a series of suicide attempts and periods of solitary confinement, Rusher was placed on "crisis watch" for a period of eight months.

According to Rusher's lawyer, Alan Mills, being on crisis watch meant being stripped of all clothing and belongings, and placed in a bare cell with only a "suicide smock" (a single piece of thick woven ny-

lon, too stiff to fold, with holes for one's head and arms). During this time, Rusher was monitored through a plexiglass wall, with the lights on, twenty-four hours a day. Rather than receiving mental health care, Rusher was kept naked, except for her rigid smock, in an empty cell. She was given strict, dehumanizing instructions about how to wipe herself and manage her menstrual hygiene, which included a requirement that her hands be visible to the guard watching her at all times. In order to read, Rusher had to persuade a prison guard to hold an open book against the glass of her cell, and turn each page as she finished reading it.

As time wore on, Rusher asked her attorney: "Who in her situation wouldn't want to kill themselves?"

At the end of her sentence, Rusher was finally transferred to a mental health facility. Rusher, who disclosed to her doctors that she had experienced childhood sexual abuse, had received dozens of diagnoses over the years, including schizoaffective disorder, but nonetheless made great strides while in treatment. Eight months into her in-patient care, however, Rusher got into altercation with another patient. Rather than treating the episode as a symptom of her mental health problems, she was sent back to jail, where the cycle of carceral violence continued.

After Rusher's death, her mother, Kelli Andrews, said in a statement, "Tiffany was a beautiful soul with hopes for her future. She was looking forward to coming home to be with her family. We miss her every day." Sangamon County jail returned Rusher to solitary confinement, where she remained for three months before being found unresponsive with a ripped piece of a towel around her neck. Rusher died twelve days later when the hospital removed her from life support. In the words of Mills, "First they tortured her, then they killed her."

At the time of her death, Tiffany Rusher was twenty-seven years old.

Sadly, what Rusher endured was not exceptional. The US prison system is designed to crush people like Tiffany Rusher every day, with only a small section of society laboring to help prisoners save themselves from being ground under. In Rusher's case, the attorneys and staff of Uptown People's Law Center in Chicago were her defenders, but, in the end, the wounds inflicted by the system were too deep, and the cycle of carceral violence was simply too entrenched to interrupt. Rusher, now a statistic to the world at large and a court

filing to those her attorneys would hold accountable for her death, was refused any recognition of her humanity while incarcerated. But Rusher was not a number. She was a human being, and restoring our awareness of the humanity of prisoners is a crucial step toward undoing the harms of mass incarceration.

As prison abolitionists, grassroots organizers, and practitioners of transformative justice, our vision for 2018 is one of clear-eyed awareness and discussion of the horrors of the prison system—and the action that awareness demands. As a society, we have long turned away from any social concern that overwhelms us. Whether it's war, climate change, or the prison-industrial complex, Americans have been conditioned to simply look away from profound harms. Years of this practice have now left us with endless wars, dying oceans, and millions of people in bondage and oppressively policed. It is time for a thorough, unflinching examination of what our society has wrought and what we have become. It is time to envision and create alternatives to the hellish conditions our society has brought into being.

The Illusion of a New Idea

Outspoken opponents of abolishing the prison-industrial complex typically portray abolitionists as politically inactive academics who spout impossible ideas. None of this could be further from the truth. Abolitionists come from all backgrounds, and most are politically active. From bail reform to strategic electoral interventions and mutual aid, prison abolitionists are steadily at work in our communities, employing tactics of harm reduction, lobbying for and against legislation, defending the rights of prisoners in solidarity with those organizing for themselves on the inside, and working to forward a vision of social transformation.

As a political framework, abolition has gained significant ground in recent years, with groups like the National Lawyers Guild adopting the philosophy in their work. A growing number of grassroots abolitionist organizers have co-organized nationally recognized campaigns such as the #ByeAnita effort in Chicago, which helped to successfully remove former state's attorney Anita Alvarez from office. Abolitionist organizers also helped lead efforts to win reparations for survivors of torture that occurred under the now infamous police commander Jon

Burge in Chicago—a city that has, over the past two decades, become a hub of abolitionist organizing. Abolition is a practical organizing strategy.

Like any enterprise that was born of a manufactured demand, prisons perpetuate themselves, and that requires the maintenance of conditions that foster crime. From 1978 to 2014, the US prison population rose 408 percent, largely filling its cages with those denied access to education, employment, and human services. About 70 percent of prisoners in California are former foster care youth. And given that the system is actually geared toward recidivism, there can be no argument that the prison system supports either public safety or the public good. Our failure to build a culture of care that nurtures human growth and potential, rather than incubating desperation, ensures that more "criminals" will be created and subsequently punished, to the great benefit of those who profit from industries associated with incarceration. Prison is simply a bad and ineffective way to address violence and crime.

Yet when we speak about the abolition of the prison-industrial complex, many react as though the idea is alien and unthinkable—as if, to them, prisons, policing and surveillance are part of a natural order that simply cannot be undone. In truth, the prison system did not see its most massive population surge until the 1980s, when deindustrialization created the need for dungeon economies to replace lost jobs, and a backlash against the Civil Rights Movement and other social gains by Black people propelled heightened efforts at social control.

As a society, we have been taught to embrace social control, which is often enforced by people with guns, because we have been taught to fear each other, and to acquiesce to authority. We live in a culture that celebrates criminalization, cops, and prisons. Abusive, torturous police become sympathetic television characters whose harms the public can understand or even sympathize with. But when a civilian has committed an egregious harm, the national solace we are taught to seek is to see them suffer. They must be thrown in a cage, and, once they are, justice is considered to be done, and we can all move on with our lives without ever asking questions like: Why did this happen? Why does it keep happening? And is there something we could change that would make this tragedy unthinkable in the first place?

Clapping for Incarceration

Even those who acknowledge that mass incarceration in the US is nightmarish and unjust often feel compelled to applaud when the system ensnares someone whose harms disgust us. When Martin Shkreli, a former hedge fund manager, was sentenced to serve seven years for securities fraud, memes and laughter abounded. Shkreli, who famously engaged in pharmaceutical price-gauging, raising the price of the drug Daraprim from $13.50 to $750 per pill, was once characterized as the "most hated man in America," making him an ideal poster child for the carceral state. But like most ideas that allow us to avert our eyes and ignore the larger system, this notion is full of holes.

For one, Shkreli was not being punished for forcing AIDS patients to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for a lifesaving medication, because rich people simply are not punished for practicing capitalism in the United States. As long as their money changing kills according to the rules of the free market, they see no penalty. Shkreli was punished for securities fraud. In short, he played Monopoly with the filthy rich and broke the rules. Yet, because he also harmed everyday people, this moment is held up as one where the system worked, because someone we feel contempt for was punished. The system will occasionally offer such kernels, but they don't add up to justice.

No reform is being forced upon the pharmaceutical industry in the wake of Shkreli's harms, and the executives who are driving up prices on insulin and other lifesaving medications are not faced with jail time (if this is our marker of justice). Our society's practice of "justice" is not concerned with creating just conditions, and our system of punishment does not penalize the powerful for crushing those with less power. The rich getting richer while others are ground under is part of the "just" order of our society. There are no solutions offered by the system, only the occasional display of suffering or civil death to satisfy the masses.

Given these conditions, we must understand that, by applauding carceral violence, we are also applauding an established and grotesque failure on the part of Western civilization.

Stories like Tiffany Rusher's are buried under headlines about people like Shkreli and serial rapist Larry Nassar—stories that reassure the public that retribution is necessary and that sate a popular desire for

vengeance in the face of tragedy and harm. American crime stories are not stories of good versus evil, because the system is not and has never been good or heroic, and criminal harms are usually much more complex than we would care to acknowledge. The crimes for which Tiffany Rusher was convicted involved sex with a minor, but why was Rusher in sexual proximity to a minor in the first place?

Prison is simply a bad and ineffective way to address violence and crime. Cases like Rusher's call on us both to acknowledge the harms our system has inflicted and to create the kind of social and economic conditions in which a young woman would never be presented with the choices that Rusher faced. According to Rusher, she was doing survival sex work when she was solicited to provide sexual services at a party. As it turned out, the young man a relative wanted to purchase sexual favors for was underage. Rusher was twenty-one years old. When the young man's mother learned about the party, she was incensed and filed a police report. And just like that, Rusher became a sex offender in the eyes of the law. However different her experiences may have been from those who are typically characterized as predators, Rusher was ensnared by a damning and unyielding brand of criminalization.

"Dangerous People"

When confronted with statistics about how unevenly criminal penalties are applied in the United States, or with historical evidence that policing and incarceration have always been grounded in anti-Blackness, Native erasure, and protection of property, most leftists will decry the system and agree that change is long overdue. But such admissions are usually followed by an insistence that we cannot simply uproot the system, because we don't have polished, universalized, fully formed solutions to address the dangers some individuals, often characterized as predators, may pose to our communities.

But the idea of "predators" and "dangerous people" is complicated by the conditions our society enforces—social and economic conditions that we know generate crime and despair. Communities whose needs are met are not rife with crimes of desperation, whereas struggling communities are; and people from communities that are highly criminalized by our racist system are far more likely to be thrust into the carceral system.

Politicians routinely feign ignorance with regard to these dynamics, presenting "tough-on-crime" agendas that would enhance prison sentences and widen the school-to-prison pipeline as a solution to the harms society generates. Because if politicians acknowledged that most criminalized harms are rooted in social and economic inequities, they would be expected to address those inequities, which most refuse to do. In the United States, the political careers of elected officials are largely funded by those who directly benefit from the inequities of our society, and those funders would likely abandon their pet officials if they pursued anything resembling economic justice.

The carceral system has always used sensationalized cases and the specter of unthinkable harm to create new mechanisms of disposability. Those mechanisms are what feed bodies to hungry dungeon economies while we are distracted by our own fears of "bad people" and what they might do if they aren't contained. Of course, a system that never addresses the *why* behind a harm never actually contains the harm itself. Cages confine people, not the conditions that facilitated their harms or the mentalities that perpetuate violence. Yet, for some reason, even people who are well versed in the dynamics of the system often believe *Law and Order* moments are possible, when, just for a moment, an instrument of state violence can be made good.

In their essay on "The University and the Undercommons," writers and scholars Fred Moten and Stefano Harney underscore why abolition is important as a political framework and organizing strategy: "What is, so to speak, the object of abolition? Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society." When we look past the sensationalism of major headlines, and examine the actual dynamics of mass incarceration, it becomes increasingly impossible to justify this perspective. While some offer calls for reform, such calls ignore the reality that an institution grounded in the commodification of human beings, through torture and the deprivation of their liberty, cannot be made good. The logic of using policing, punishment, and prison has not proven to address the systemic causes of violence. It is in this climate that we argue that

abolition of the prison-industrial complex is the most moral political posture available to us. Because the deconstruction of the American system of mass incarceration is possible, and it is time.

What Does Transformation Look Like?

Our vision for 2018 is a state of unrestrained imagination. When dealing with oppressive systems, cynicism is a begrudging allegiance, extracted from people whose minds could otherwise open new doors, make new demands, and conjure visions of what a better world could look like. Questions like "What about the really dangerous people?" are not questions a prison abolitionist must answer in order to insist the prison-industrial complex must be undone.

These are questions we must collectively answer, even as we trouble the very notion of "dangerousness." The inability to offer a neatly packaged and easily digestible solution does not preclude offering critique or analysis of the ills of our current system.

We live in a society that has been locked into a false sense of inevitability. It's time to look hard at how this system came to be, who profits, how it functions, and why—and it's time to imagine what it would look like to see justice done without relying on punishment and the barbarity of carceral systems. As writer and educator Erica Meiners suggests: "Liberation under oppression is unthinkable by design." It's time for a jailbreak of the imagination in order to make the impossible possible.

Hope Is a Discipline

Interview by Kim Wilson and Brian Sonenstein

Beyond Prisons, January 2018

Kim Wilson: *I think someone retweeted something you posted the other day, and it just really resonated with me and has helped me tremendously. . . . It is something you wrote about hope being a discipline. I got to tell you, it made my day, if not my week, absolutely! Because it is easy to get down on everything that's going on.*

Mariame Kaba: Sure.

Wilson: *It's really easy to kind of look around and be like, "Oh my God, everything, set it all on fire and let's just be done!"* [laughs] *Especially right now, and I think that plugging in with folks and reading things and listening to things that are affirming and uplifting and do allow you to focus on the hopeful side of things are part of abolition. I'd like you to say something about that, but I have another part to that question, which is about self-care for those of us doing this work. That's something I spend a lot of time thinking about and talking about.*

Kaba: I always tell people, for me, hope doesn't preclude feeling sadness or frustration or anger or any other emotion that makes total sense. Hope isn't an emotion, you know? Hope is not optimism.

I think that for me, understanding that is really helpful in my practice around organizing. I believe that there's always a potential for transformation and for change. And that is in any direction, good or bad. The idea of hope being a discipline is something I heard from a nun many years ago who was talking about it in conjunction with making sure we were of the world and in the world. Living in the afterlife already in the present was kind of a form of escape, but it was really, really important

for us to live in the world and be of the world. The hope that she was talking about was this grounded hope that was practiced every day, that people actually practiced all the time.

I bowed down to that. I heard that many years ago, and then I felt the sense of, "Oh my God. That speaks to me as a philosophy of living, that hope is a discipline and that we have to practice it every single day." Because in the world we live in, it's easy to feel a sense of hopelessness, that everything is all bad all the time, that nothing is going to change ever, that people are evil and bad at the bottom. It feels sometimes that it's being proven in various different ways, so I really get that. I understand why people feel that way. I just choose differently. I choose to think a different way, and I choose to act in a different way. I choose to trust people until they prove themselves untrustworthy.

Jim Wallace, who people know as a liberal Evangelical, who thinks about faith a lot and talks about faith a lot, he always talks about the fact that hope is really believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change. And that, to me, makes total sense. I believe ultimately that we're going to win, because I believe there are more people who want justice, real justice, than there are those who are working against that.

And I don't take a short-term view. I take a long view, understanding full well that I'm just a tiny, little part of a story that already has a huge antecedent and has something that is going to come after that. I'm definitely not going to be even close to around for seeing the end of it. That also puts me in the right frame of mind: that my little friggin' thing I'm doing is actually pretty insignificant in world history, but if it's significant to one or two people, I feel good about that. If I'm making my stand in the world and that benefits my particular community of people, the people I designate as my community, and I see them benefiting by my labor, I feel good about that. That actually is enough for me.

Maybe I just have a different perspective. I talk to a lot of young organizers—people reach out to me a lot because I've been organizing for a long time—I'm always telling them—"Your timeline is not the timeline on which movements occur. Your timeline is incidental. Your timeline is only for yourself to mark your growth and your living." But that's a fraction of the living that's going to be done by the universe and that has already been done by the universe. When you understand that

you're really insignificant in the grand scheme of things, then it's a freedom, in my opinion, to actually be able to do the work that's necessary as you see it and to contribute in the ways that you see fit.

And self-care is really tricky for me because I don't believe in the self in the way that people determine it here in this capitalist society that we live in. I don't believe in self-care: I believe in collective care, collectivizing our care, and thinking more about how we can help each other. How can we collectivize the care of children so that more people can feel like they can actually have their kids but also live in the world and contribute and participate in various different ways? How do we do that?

How do we collectivize care so that when we're sick and we're not feeling ourselves, we've got a crew of people who are not just our prayer warriors but our action warriors who are thinking through with us? Like, I'm just not going to be able to cook this week, and you have a whole bunch of folks there who are just putting a list together for you and bringing food every day that week, and you're doing the same for your community too.

I want that as the focus of how I do things, and that really comes from the fact that I grew up the daughter of returned migrants, African returned migrants. I don't see the world the way that people do here. I don't agree with it; I think capitalism is actually continuously alienating us from each other, but also even from ourselves, and I just don't subscribe. For me, it's too much, "Yeah, I'm going to go do yoga, and then I'm going to go and do some sit-ups and maybe I'll go . . . " You don't have to go anywhere to care for yourself. You can just care for yourself and your community in tandem, and that can actually be much more healthy for you, by the way. Because all this internalized reflection is not good for people. Yes, think about yourself, reflect on your practice, okay. But then you need to test it in the world; you've got to be with people. That's important. And I hate people! So I say that as somebody who actually is really antisocial.

[Wilson and Sonenstein laugh]

Kaba: And I say, "I hate people." I don't want to socialize in that kind of way, but I do want to be social with other folks as it relates to collectivizing care.

PART II

There Are No Perfect Victims